

Otherwise

by theatrics

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Summary: The trials and tribulations of Penny and Seaweed's relationship were already a given, but as things really begin to dangerously heat up, it becomes a battle of just whom to trust.

1. Grumble and Grouse

****Kelsey Rose****: Hello, and welcome to Otherwise! Now, you guys are really going to have to bare with me on this story. I've wanted to write it for ages, and now that I finally amâ€¦ it's sort of awkward (perfect word for any situation!) and difficult for me, at times. I have to incorporate some of the script as well as fresh dialogue, but I promise you, as soon as I can break free from the main storyline and into the times after it, the script will go bye-bye for good, and in will come the original lines from yours truly! So, for now, just know that the script is only included for the sake of time accuracy, factualness, and all of that good stuff. :) This is supposed to focus on Penny and Seaweed, and how they felt during the musical's entirety. So, be sure to keep that in mind!

The story begins just after Tracy is accepted onto The Corny Collins Council.

That said, let's hope that I never have a note that long again! Hehehe.

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><p>Chapter One:

Grumble and Grouse

It seemed so surreal to Penny. To think, her best friend, Tracy Turnblad, had acquired the fame she had so fervently desired almost overnight! She had been so proud of her, so indescribably proud. Tracy was a like a sister to her, really. God knows a girl like her needed someone like Tracy, especially with her eccentric family life.

But, anyway - all else aside, she had been elated ever since. That is, of course, until she found out about her friend's unjust placement in Special Education. While it was visibly unfair to Tracy, Penny couldn't help but wonder what this meant for herself, as well. She wasn't one to think so highly of herself, or even so selfishly, butâ€¦ with no Tracy, that meant she was alone. They had every class together! What was she supposed to do? Penny was fairly impressionable, so Tracy had always been there to keep her together. So, now what?

The piercing sound of a school bell from the hallways jarred the redhead from her usual daydream-y state. Chewing relentlessly on the stale piece of bubblegum in her mouth, she stared at the clock with wide eyes. Gym class! Penny groaned softly and gathered her things. Typically she didn't mind this block, but without Tracy to joke and giggle with: what was there to do? Amber and her gang were far too concerned with themselves to even begin to think of chilling out with a so-called 'loser' like herself, or so that's what she perceived from their constant giggling and pointing at her on occasions. The idea of being alone certainly struck Penny as unbearable, but something told her that things held at least some promise. Accordingly, she snatched up the rest of her belongings and began to head towards the girls' changing room to dress out.

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>Walking onto the field by her lonesome was awkward, to say the least. Lucky for her, though, she didn't gather many stares, if any at all. She was Penny Pingleton, and - in their eyes - nothing but another girl, someone simply known as 'Tracy Turnblad's best friend.' It didn't bother her one bit, actually, as it was evident that this girl wasn't one for style, so to speak. <p>Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a painful sight of something familiar. Snapping her head in the general direction of what she thought she saw, Penny almost cracked a full-blown, goofy grin before she realized that the person with hair so excruciatingly similar to Tracy's was not actually her best friend. It was Tammy, another girl from The Corny Collins Show. Curious at this new look of hers, she blew a bubble with her freshly unwrapped piece of gum and walked over to the girl, just after Amber and the other girls were through giving her grief about the new 'fashion statement' she was putting on. Tammy quirked a brow at the single, redheaded girl, but smiled nonetheless. She had always been one of the more nicer, understanding girls on the council. If nothing else, when she wasn't around those other she-devils, she didn't seem to despise the idea of integration and speaking to 'those below her' too much. Or, at all, maybe. For Penny, it was difficult to tell.

"Hi, Tammy!" She added cheerfully, as an air of childlike bliss swept over the bubbly teenager. "I like your hair."

"Happenin', isn't it?" The other girl remarked triumphantly, rather proud that she had finally swayed someone to what she believed was

the appropriate response to her hairdo. Penny merely continued to smile and chew her gum absentmindedly. Tammy seemed satisfied with her compliment, in any case, so it wasn't as though she was required to say much else. However, even if she had planned on it, the sudden roar of laughter caught her attention as she (_much to her excitement _) took notice of the arrival of the Special Ed class. What a wonderful surprise! She would get to see Tracy at gym class, after all!

She began to chew her gum at a more rapid pace as she immediately darted over to Tracy with one of the hugest grins imaginable on her lips.

"Hi, Tracy! Sorry about your Special Edness. But! Think of it as a testament to the record-breaking extremes your hair has reached. I'm so jealous!" Her words came out in a rush of excitement and utter happiness as she locked eyes with her friend, only to have her gaze drawn away by something far more unexpected and magnificent. It was that moment that she found her pale eyes upon what she knew must be the most gorgeous guy she had ever seen in her whole life. And he was actually looking at her! Not Amber, not some other 'pretty' girl, but her! Penny felt as though her heart skipped a beat, just as Tracy gave her a light squeeze on her nearest hand. Oh, gosh - she hadn't realized that her mouth had been wide-open the entire time. And how long had she been staring? She had to say something, anything.

"Hell_ooooooooo_â€¦!" She bellowed, not even believing it herself when she came to final realization of what actually come out of her mouth. Tracy stifled a giggle, while the boy in question offered the Penny a charming smile that virtually stole her away, again and again.

"Seaweed, this is my best friend, Penny Lou Pingleton," Tracy announced smoothly. Seaweed? So, that was his name? Penny felt her eyes grow wider as his attention suddenly drifted to her once more. She had to remind herself to breathe nearly, and that was not an easy thing to do when you were face-to-face with such an attractive boy like him. That smile, the alluring atmosphere about him - Penny couldn't help but house the complete desire to learn so much more about him, about Seaweed.

Out of almost nowhere, Penny came back to the bracing reality that he had indeed moved closer. It must've been a fraction of a second, but it had happened.

"Wait! I've seen you beforeâ€¦ at the gum machine! Gettin' your Wrigley's on!" Seaweed chorused suavely, an almost suggestive grin upon his lips. Penny felt her voice catch in her throat as she stared up at him. It was practically intimidating how he towered over her, and yet, somehow, unusually sheltering, too.

"I do two packs a day!" She replied proudly. The words slipped past her lips like an impulse. Seaweed edged a bit closer, causing the teenaged girl to flinch and arch her back slightly.

"Hm" He leaned down a little, eyes entirely focused on her as she drew in a sharp breath and then significantly increased the chewing speed on her gum. This wasn't happening; this wasn't happening; _this wasn't happening! _Oh, but it was! "All that chewing must make the

muscles in your mouth mighty strong." Concluded the dark-skinned boy, his eyebrows lifted in evocative curiosity.

"Noâ€ probably just average!" Penny chimed, her response overthrown by Amber von Tussle's sudden approach to the trio. Whatever she went off about, Penny completely missed it. For, even though Seaweed was caught up in the present actions, along with the rest of the detention and now Special Education regulars, she was still mesmerized by the ghost of his appearance. It was only when she heard a hasty and expressive, "Amber von Tussle, you have acne of the soul!" from Tracy, that she snapped back into the real world, just in time to dodge a playing ball to the head. Jeez, she had been so out of it that she hadn't even heard the coach announce that they would be playing another hellish game of scatter dodge ball. Penny relented. She could fantasize on her own time, when she didn't risk severe concussions and brain trauma from a blow to her skull.

****BAM! ****

It was so sudden when she realized that Tracy had hit the ground.

"Tracy! Tracy!" Penny shrieked, running to her friend's side, without even noticing that she could have very well run Seaweed or Link over in the process. Amber had left all in a huff because Link Larkin, Tracy's longtime crush, hadn't gone with her - as if Penny was one to notice the small details, though.

"Are you dead?" Her voice had risen considerably as she stared, concerned, at the fallen, and currently unconscious, brunette. Link and Seaweed were knelt close to the teen, as well.

"I'd better go get the school nurse," Seaweed offered, rising to his feet.

"I'll go with you!" Shocked at her own proposition, Penny blew a rather large bubble with her gum, a clear sign of concealed embarrassment in her book. Though, somewhat of a spark glimmered in Seaweed's eyes as he gave her the once-over before glancing down at Tracy one more time.

"Come on, then. We'd better hurry," Grasping her hand unexpectedly, Seaweed began to guide a very stunned Penny Pingleton towards the school building. She scarcely knew what to do with herself. Everything had become such a blur. All that she knew for certain was that she had to help Tracy, and fast. That plastic Amber von Tussle had spiked her in the head during dodge ball, andâ€ and--Seaweedâ€ had such remarkably soft skin. Her fingers twitched gawkily against his hand, which still had hers clutched eagerly as he automatically forced her to keep up with his mighty pace. Catching the possible uncomfortable vibe from her, he casually released her hand, just in time to reach the school doors and burst inside.

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>"Tracy'll be fine," Seaweed reassured her with a flashy smile, as they neared the darkened nurse's office. <p>"I sure hope soâ€" Penny never intended to make any more of that sentence. Though, truthfully, she had been cut off by her own edginess, which only meant that she blew another huge bubble with that persistent gum of hers. Seaweed

produced an enchanting 'heh' just before he peered into the office window, twisted the doorknob, and let himself in. He stared around the small room and dropped his arms in dismay at his sides.<p>

"So much for that plan. She ain't even here," He rolled his eyes. Penny followed his example and let herself in while looking around the place. Her eyes ultimately landed on a somewhat crumbled note on the nurse's very messy desk. Naturally, she picked it up and began to glance over and try to decipher the words that had such horrible penmanship. All of a sudden, the redhead giggled, much to Seaweed's surprise. "What's goin' on?"

"It says the nurse is out sick," She found herself snickering a bit more as she twirled the muddled piece of paper between her fingers. Glancing up at Seaweed sheepishly, she wondered if he shared her silent amusement. As if on cue, he clicked his tongue. The amusement was subtle enough for Penny to just barely catch on.

"Sorta ironic," He looked about the room and moved here and there, starting to thumb through a few nooks and crannies as he searched for something unknown to the girl. It was then that apprehension swiftly collided with her, however clear that was by her newly widened eyes and parted lips. Seaweed paused, side-glancing her uncertainly as a peculiar expression settled on his face. But, before he could even get a word in, she burst out with a:

"Oh _no!_ Seaweed! What are we gonna _dooooo_? Tracy's in trouble. She needs us; she _needs the nurse_." Her eyebrows furrowed as she stared, panicky. It was very clear to him (_as for her, that was another story entirely _) that she was blowing the whole situation out of proportion. After all, it was just a minor blow to the head. Even still, he found the eruption strangely engaging, so he smiled a teensy bit, which caused Penny to gawk at him in horror. "What? This is nothing to smile about! What if she's _really dead_?" Was it weird that Seaweed found that all the more adorable, in a way? He moved over to her and placed a secure hand on one of her shoulders. She tensed up.

"Whooooaaa there. You're forgettin' who you've got here," He noted, insinuating himself with a smug grin. "Seaweed J. Stubbs ain't lettin' anybody die on his watch. C'mon, I think I got what I need to help your friend out," Penny stared at him, overtly astonished.

"What? What is it?" She blinked her eyes a few times, trying to convince herself that what was happening was actually real. Seaweed pursed his lips in a prideful smirk as he whisked a handful of something from his left pants pocket.

"Here they are."

"Band-Aids?"

"Yeeep."

An explosion of a smile twisted her features as she stared at the Band-Aids that he held within his hand.

"Oh, Seaweed!" She voiced her approval further with the ceremonial popping sound of her gum. The boy could only sneer pleasantly at his

feat.

"Let's go, now. Can't leave Tracy hangin' for too long," He stated, his voice at a complete ease. Penny frowned inwardly. As much as she really, _really_ wanted to help Tracy, something about leaving this moment with Seaweed left her confused and unsure. Nevertheless, she nodded briskly and followed the exiting Seaweed out of the door and back to the field.

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>In a rush and haze, Penny realized that they had returned to the now-conscious Tracy, and Link, who seemed weirdly besotted with something or another. The redhead shrugged it off, as if she'd ever be able to understand boys. <p>"The nurse is out sick," Penny proclaimed flatly. Her tone then took a turn for the better. "But, look what Seaweed found!" She looked over to where the proud boy stood, his hands shuffling through both of his pockets. They're in the left pocketâ€| The teenaged girl found herself thinking. Little did she know that she would catch sight of something positivelyâ€| well, _wow_.

"Band-Aids!" He waved them around a bit and then lifted up his other hand. "Some gum, and - uh--" A mere second of fumbling produced another wrapper of some sort. "A rubber!" Penny's mouth dropped open as he paused and looked at the newest prize in his hand. "Oh, wait. That's mine." The tall boy snickered and stuffed the Band-Aids, gum, and rubber back into their specified pockets.

"He's so nurturing!" And gorgeous, and sweet, andâ€| Penny really needed to control her stare-factor. Clearing her throat self-consciously, she trailed her eyes across the ground and, inevitably, to Tracy. She was introducing Seaweed to Link (the two merely partook in a "how ya doin'?" back and forth respectively), which was really considerate of her, of course, but the Penny couldn't help but wonder if she was still 'all right' as she claimed to be. "How are _you_ doing?"

"How do you think? I just got creamed in front of the entire school," Tracy replied dejectedly. Penny frowned, blew a bubble with her gum, and touched the other teenager on her hand gently.

Then, out of the blue, Seaweed knocked the back of his hand against Link's arm (what that meant, Penny had _no_ clue) and produced the most interesting look of pleasure on his face as he turned his attention to Tracy.

"Hey, Trace, I know what'll make ya feel better! My mom's hostin' a party at our recordshop on North Avenue. Wanna comeâ€| _check it out_?" Penny felt her knees beginning to buckle again, for what, the eleventh time in under an hour? Fortunately, though, she held herself steady as this idea drilled its way into her head. Emotions swam in torrents in the pit of her stomach. She had always been so passive about boys, albeit _dorky_, but now was the perfect chance to shed that part of her personality, if only for one day. So, constructing a horribly fake cough, she pushed herself between Seaweed, Tracy, and Link. _Assertive, Penny, that's the word_.

"I, too, feel not good," The redhead fluttered her eyes, held her fist just centimeters from her lips, and stared innocently at the

dark-skinned boy who now seemed so unbelievably close to her. "May I also come," She paused to make spastic quotation marks with her hands and even got her body into it, as well. It was the sort of spur of the moment thing that made her sub-conscience go _what was _**that**? "â€| _'check it out'_"

Tracy and Link exchanged glances while Seaweed looked upon this redhead, uncertain if he should be a little frightened or even, god forbid, pleased. She was cute, a little _different_, butâ€| there was an admirable degree of something-- uh, just _something_ about her. Continuing his natural masquerade of charm, he took a step towards her, glanced downward, and cracked a captivating smile. (Penny was more or less the epitome of a speechless, babbling brook with her mouth wide-open at this point, but who was judging?) "Oh, you surely may."

Oh my god! _Oh my god! _Penny, before she could take part in any more word vomit, wheeled around on her heels and retreated to the confident-as-ever Tracy Turnblad's left arm, which she swiftly clung to. The big-haired teen had been staring at the scene with clear interest. Although, it was easily cast aside for later when she snapped back into the moment.

This is it, Penny thought as they began to walk. She was _finally_ going to get to strut her stuff. Gosh, now she knew why Tracy was so worried about her hair all of the time! Now all she had to do was hope for the best, whether that meant for the ideal humidity outside or, more feared, the huge collection of _otherwise_. The mysteries of North Avenue were only the beginning, as well as the base to her current line of predicaments.

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Kelsey Rose: Chapter two's going to be more fun. Don't worry about that! Then again, anything with Motormouth Maybelle and North Avenue involved is bound to be loads of fun. ;) So, R&R, and stay tuned!

2. I Get My Best Dancing Lessons From You

Kelsey Rose: Thanks so much for all the encouragement! You guys are really amazing. Just so you know, this chapter really worried me, but hopefully it isn't as iffy as I think it is. I had loads of fun with it. Penny and Seaweed just have the most awesome chemistry to play with. Hope you guys enjoy it!

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><p>Chapter Two:

I Get My Best Dancing Lessons From You

"I've never been to North Avenue!" Tracy had chirped as they continued their not-so-long walk and then bus ride to Motormouth Maybelle's record shop. Seaweed had been paying attention, yes, but his mind was in another place entirely. Between Link's asking whether or not it'd be safe for a bunch of 'white folk' like them, and then his exchange with Tracy, he found himself only clinging to one ideal, one particular section of the on-coming partyâ€|

"Imagine!" Penny's voice was like a pleasant wake-up call. "Being invited to places byâ€| _colored people_" Seaweed's lips warped into a slightly haughty sneer. This trio was soâ€| inspiring, in a weird sort of way. Most white kids would've dropped a brick when he came around, but not them. They were like a breath of fresh air.

"It feels so hip!" The fame-bound teenager, Tracy Turnblad, gripped onto her best friend's hand more tightly as they finally neared the outside of Ms. Maybelle's hip-and-happenin' joint. Seaweed surveyed each of his new friends' expressions, as if trying to pinpoint just what they were thinking. Tracy was completely thrilled. Link shared the same bit of excitement, with an extra flair of fear and uncertainty. Then, there was Penny. She was fun to read. Yet, this time, her look of utter shock and bewilderment touched a special place in his heart. She looked like she could succumb to her visibly shaky knees at any moment. And, as unsettling as that was, Seaweed still found it sweet. She would be fine, of that he was one hundred percent certain.

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>After speaking a word or two to them, he lead the trembling group of three inside to a scene of at least twenty or so African American teens and L'il Inez dancing away like there was no tomorrow. Motormouth Maybelle manned the DJ station, of course, sending a pulse of trendy music throughout the cozy and highly stylish shop. Involuntarily grabbing onto Penny's nearest wrist again, he guided her and the other two straight to his mother, much to the shock and contempt of the rest of the dancing teens. To them, this was just a bunch of white fools crashing their party, and that wasn't cool, at all. Inez, however, was staring at Tracy with wide eyes and a look of true admiration on her face. <p>"Tracy Turnblad!" Several heads turned as L'il Inez moved forward, including that of Ms. Maybelle's. Some faces contained disgust, others hidden intrigue, and then one of pleasant surprise (from Motormouth, no doubt). Tracy smiled down at her. "You're my favorite dancer on The Corny Collins Show!" Her fondness was really delightful, which only caused Tracy's smile to grow, as well as the nervous Penny's.<p>

Seaweed moved and put an arm around his sibling. "This is my sister, L'il Inez," He began, his eyes trailing over his friends, both black and white, who had begun to gather, even if it was only at a fair enough distance. "Hey, everybody! This is Tracy Turnblad and Link Larkin from the show," He noted them first, while others shrugged at the familiar pair. Some were more friendly and responsive than others. "Andâ€|" His gaze fell on the retreated Penny, who was restlessly hanging off of Tracy's arm. It was really a wonder that she hadn't cut off the circulation of it yet. "This is Penny." There was a foggy hint of a weakness in his voice, and that both startled and caught Penny off guard, as well as Tracy, apparently. But, it went virtually unnoticed as Ms. Maybelle began to speak:

"Well, what a pleasant surprise! Looks like my baby's whipped out some new friends right before our eyes," She chuckled and walked out from behind her DJ booth. "Always a pleasure to see a fresh face up in this place." The older woman went over to her son and daughter and put her arms around both. That was about when the stiff sight of Penny Pingleton caught her eye. "And what's wrong with you, baby?" Penny shot up immediately, especially after feeling that burning sensation of all eyes on her.

"Hi, m-ma'am! I'm Penny Lou Pingleton, and I am very pleased _and _scared to be here," She worked with a big and overdone smile, that only produced a hearty laugh from Motormouth Maybelle. Tracy squeezed her friend's hand to jumpstart her breathing process again.

"You're welcome, kitten, to come and sit in," She nodded her head in that polished way of hers, as her eyes fell upon Tracy, who stepped forward, automatically releasing Penny's hand. The redhead glanced around, taking note of her surroundings as Seaweed and she locked eyes at random. It was something that always caused her to flinch a little and then smile.

Tracy went on to say how she had only gotten onto Corny's show because of Seaweed, which set a look of fire in the eyes of many of the kids there, including Ms. Maybelle's. Her ending of, "Why can't we all just dance together like this on TV?" was what really got things going, however. Though, Penny was a little brain-dead to it all, considering her current location. Motormouth Maybelle scoffed.

"Think we haven't tried? We've pleaded, begged, and lied. We pressured the mayor, petitioned the gov., and what did we get?"

"One day a month!" The other kids chorused, which as you might expect, coaxed Penny to join her fellow earthlings by looking around and at least acting alive.

"C'mon, y'all. Enough talk! We came here to dance," Seaweed announced impatiently, as he studied everyone's faces. "Let's play some hide and seek." When he said that, his eyes came across the deer-in-the-headlights, pale-skinned young woman. Penny drew back slightly, but then realized what this could mean, and about what she had promised herself by coming here. As Seaweed grabbed onto her hands, he stared down at her. "What're you afraid of, huh?" He teased, and she blushed. Catching her doubts as though they were airborne, he grinned. "I'll teach ya some moves. No sweat!"

That said, he pulled her closer to him, leaving only a few inches between them. Penny's eyes flew open as wide as they had ever been. She couldn't ever remember being _this_ close to a guy before! Her heartbeat increased tenfold, so much that she was worried he could hear or feel it from where he stood.

"Okay now," He started, his eyes wandering while he tried to conjure up the perfect first lesson. "Stand like this." Seaweed gratefully demonstrated as Penny awkwardly shifted into something similar to that position. She had never been much of a dancer (_well, if _**that**_ wasn't the biggest understatement of all timeâ€¦| _), seeing as how that was more of Tracy's thing. So, it was really no surprise at all how her hunched over stance made the learning

procedure a million times more difficult than it had to be.

Of course, you know, Seaweed just found it cute, even if it meant more work for him.

"Nowâ€¦" He leaned closer still. "Just get into the music!" Finding his own, personal beat, he stared expectantly at Penny as he began to dance, as smooth as ever. She stared back, horrified at the idea of having to match or even come close to his skill. Nonetheless, she was going to try. Awkwardly and slowly, she allowed herself to move, though as little as possible. She didn't move her hips at all, or her arms, or even her feet. It took every last muscle in Seaweed's face and chest to keep him from sporting a catty grin or producing an earth-shaking laugh. What was he supposed to do with this girl? She needed more help than anyone he had ever seen. It was either that orâ€¦ no. That wasn't it. She couldn't just be 'too shy.' He wasn't about to just dish out issues on her behalf, either.

At this point, Penny was-- well, there was no real justification for what she was doing. Surely it couldn't be called 'dancing,' that is, until Seaweed placed one hand on her left hip and the other upon her right shoulder blade. Penny brought her eyes up to his, finding it odd that suddenly her face was overtaken with a very heated and uncomfortable sensation. Her lips quivered until her teeth saved the day by biting her bottom one furiously. It looked as though he was going to dip her, or something like that, but then he leaned in closer to her, their noses so close to touching that Penny wanted to scream and cower over to Tracy. Her mother and she had never really discussed love, like, or romance, as it was more or less taboo in the Pingleton household, but those rumored butterflies that she had heard about were at war in her stomach. Much like her grandmother, they were aliens, foreign to her, and yet out to take over the world (or, more appropriately, her own world). But, if anything else was supposed to happen, it was interrupted by Amber von Tussle's unexpected entrance and loud squeal of revulsion.

Seaweed cursed beneath his breath as he released Penny, but, unbeknownst to him, kept his hand about her waist, still.

"Aaaaaaieeeeeeee!" Amber's hands were drawn up to her lips as she stared around the room in terror. "Link! What are you doing in this huge crowd of minorities?" And with that fatso, Tracy Trampface, she growled inwardly. Link sighed and stepped towards her once, but then paused.

"Trying to fit in. What are you doing?" He remarked boldly, as the Ice Princess gazed upon him with the utmost disbelief. Tracy huffed proudly behind him, as Penny smirked and giggled, still oblivious to Seaweed's hand. She was trying to tune everything out, trying to figure out what had just happened. It was then, and only then, that her pale eyes caught sight of his hand. Oh, my gâ€¦ Her thoughts trailed off as she looked up to him, her feet shuffling nervously. The urge to scoot closer to him hit her like a truck. Better yet, she was so close to actually doing so, that when that villain of a stage mother, Velma von Tussle, burst in, screeching and roaring about her daughter and how nauseating this was, she grit her teeth crossly at her own failure and bad timing.

A particular phrase from Velma really stung Penny, in spite of her

previous annoyance:

"Motormouth, are you brainwashing these children?" What? What could she possibly mean by that? Seaweed's hand had long since slipped away from her now, but as Velma's eyes brushed over the sight of Penny and him standing together, she could've very well spit then and there. It was like prickling pain in Penny's abdomen, in addition to in her heart. The scorn in that one, simple look seemed like it would pester her for a lifetime, and she didn't even really understand why as of now.

As she watched the quarrel intensify, she realized that she had closed the small distance between Seaweed and herself. One of her hands rested uneasily against his arm as she continued to look on. He didn't appear to be bothered at all, but his spiritual involvement in the spat was most likely the cause of his lack of notice.

Miss Edna, Tracy's mother, had finally entered, a bag or three of chicken and waffles in hand as she smiled in a cheery fashion to each person in turn (minus Amber and Velma). Though, her mood was spoiled right off the bat when Velma exploded with a, "Oh, so you're what spawned that?"

Edna reared back and glared daggers at the faux blonde. Penny could feel herself grow rigid with developing rage, almost as if she were ready to spring at Amber and her witch of a mother. Just as she was about to give it a try, even, she felt Seaweed's hand on her shoulder. Upon looking up, she met his eyes with a look that read something like 'she isn't worth it.'

But, how did he know? The thought twisted her dry. Regardless of the when, where, and how, she dropped her bearing. She still catered to her anger, only, this time, from where she stood.

Her prayers were answered with the arrival of Mr. Turnblad. His passive nature provoked a sort of eerie calm. The colored kids were getting antsy, but they gave up and retreated back to a mentally fuming Ms. Maybelle. Amber and Velma, on the other hand, had decided that they had had enough. They couldn't stand to be 'on the wrong side of the tracks' any longer.

Penny blinked and observed as Amber and Velma stood by the door.

"What ever happened to the bland, dominated boy I fell in love with?" Amber hissed to Link, and then snapped her fingers to her mother. "Mother, come."

"With pleasure."

They were gone after that. Penny was relieved, but that was obvious by how she had finally released the death grip on Seaweed's sleeve. He side-glanced her, and she recoiled, clearing her throat as a blush crept over her cheeks again. She meant to mutter a small 'sorry,' but she just missed her chance.

"I didn't care for them," Mrs. Turnblad croaked, shrugging her shoulders.

"Are all white people like that?" L'il Inez asked, irritated, to no

one in particular.

"Naw, just most," Wilbur Turnblad assured her. Penny began to relax a little bit more, until she saw Tracy twitch with frustration. At once, the redhead was at her side, her hand clutching onto her friend's in hopes of being some form of comfort.

"Well, I know how we can start changing that," Tracy stated, her jaw set. "If kids saw us dancing together on TV, they'd realize that we're not so different, after all. We just want to have a good time!" The room's atmosphere changed on the dime, which left Penny in a dizzy haze.

"You're sayin' that you and Link would be willin' to dance with us on Negro Day? That would be earth shakin'!" Seaweed responded, his tone hinting just how excited the idea made him. Penny's heart fluttered.

"Tracyâ€¦" Link trailed off, his eyes darting around the room of people nervously. He was clearly the odd one out here.

"No. We're not going to dance on Negro Day." Tracy noted without delay.

Link finally exhaled. "Phew!"

"You're going to crash _White Day_"

The whole room virtually gasped. Penny squeezed her friend's hand eagerly, and Tracy grinned optimistically in return.

"White day is every day, ya gotta be more specific than that," Motormouth Maybelle pointed out, as others agreed in a chorus of yeah's, uh huh's, and the like.

"Is tomorrow specific enough? Think: it's Mother-Daughter Day. Motormouth, you work for the station. They could never turn you and L'il Inez away! _And, _once the two of you break the barrier, we'll all be free to dance on TV!" Tracy seemed so proud, as well as very thrilled and apprehensive about the ploy. Penny and she had always thought segregation was unnecessary and stupid and, above all else, _wrong_. But, nowâ€¦ they could actually do something about it! Or, so Penny really hoped.

"Child, it ain't that easy. What if they call the cops? People could get hurt." Ms. Maybelle hit the nail right on the head. The dark-skinned teens ceased their cheering and muttering for the time being.

"Thenâ€¦" Tracy dug her brain for an answer (this also included tightening her grip on Penny's hand). "We'll all walk out together! There's me. There's Link. And I'm sure we can get the others! Without dancers, they've got no show." Others agreed vocally, while some remained skeptical, mainly Link.

Ms. Maybelle praised Tracy, while her mother and father did the same. Link, however, went over to her at a snail's pace. Penny released her friend's hand so that the big-haired teenager could meet her crush halfway. After the two began to converse, Penny stepped back and began tapping her fingers anxiously against their opposites. By the

looks of things, this was no happy conversation. Tracy looked upset, and Link had appeared entirely doubtful about this idea from the very beginning.

Her sub-conscience escorted her back to Seaweed once more, or a few feet away from him, at least. This time, though, he was busy saying something or another to his mother to notice her. It wasn't as if she was one to pay any mind, of course. She was fully concerned with her best friend currently.

Link eventually began to dart towards the exit, and Tracy swiftly followed. Penny felt her heart writhe into a knot. This couldn't be good.

"See yaâ€¦ little darlin'," He said, at last, and then punctually took his leave. Tracy was left to pick up the pieces. Though not everyone had followed the conversation, they could basically figure out what had occurred. Penny was the first to react, like always. She went over to her, but stopped shy about a foot.

"I'm sorry, Tracyâ€¦" Her eyebrows lowered in the same way that the corners of her lips did. Tracy frowned and nodded sadly to her before walking over to her mother. Penny barely listened to their exchange. Why couldn't someone such as Link Larkin like a wonderful girl like Tracy? Penny had always thought that her friend was gorgeous and that she had a killer personality. So, what was going on? She stared at her feet.

Wilbur finally broke the monotony with a very real question. "Tracy, he could be right, you know. Should you really risk your career?" Tracy stared at him with a defiant sense of pride in her eyes.

"I never would have gotten on the show without Seaweed," She replied firmly, allowing a nice pause before she erupted with a, "No, it's payback time!" Cheers arose from the room once more. Wilbur pat his baby girl on the back and smiled, proud of her. Penny fled to Tracy's side and began chewing her new piece of gum energetically. "Okay, soâ€¦ this is how we're gonna do it: tomorrow, everyone bring your mothersâ€¦"

"And sisters!" Penny chimed in on cue.

"And meet me around the corner from the studio. And make signs!"

"Yes, and put words on them!" Brilliant suggestion from Miss Pingleton, wasn't it? It caused a few stares, but everyone tried to ignore the sheer absurdity of the statement. Tracy pat Penny on her hands and moved over to Motormouth Maybelle with promising eyes.

"Ms. Motormouth, you and L'il Inez will walk in first. Me and Mama will be right behind you," Edna stared at her daughter in disbelief.

"Excuse me?"

"They'll never be able to throw them through the door with us blocking it!"

"I'm sorry, Tracy, but I'm too fat to appear on TV."

That was when Ms. Maybelle herself butted in, with all her glitz and glamour. It left Penny bewildered and even curious.

"You can't let weight restrict your fate! Look at me! I'm on TV." She went over to Edna and put a hand on her shoulder. "C'mon, chickadee, let ole Motormouth teach ya how glamorous bein' big, blonde, and beautiful can be!" Nodding her head to the rest of the kids, she gave a sign that they could continue on with whatever it was they wanted to do. She and Miss Edna had some bonding to do over at the reasonably sized table of food that they had set up.

* * *

>Seaweed had swung into immediate action and cranked the music back up. The party was on once again! Tracy, still a bit shaken from the confrontation with Link, had taken to teaching Inez a few moves, as well as learning some more from her, too. It was a very nice swap, and it brought a grin to Seaweed's lips. <p>Remembering his practice session with Penny, he jumped at the thought to continue. She was so sweetly clueless and, well, to be honest, terrible. He meant it fondly, though, because she was honestly trying her best, and that's all he could ask for.<p>

Flipping out the collar of his shirt, he began scanning the room for her. She was either too short to be seen, or

"Must be a damn chameleon or somethin'," He turned around and almost had the sense knocked out of him. He found Penny standing there, her finger poised as if she was just about to tap him on the shoulder. "Oh, shi--" He caught himself just in time and tried to look composed again, because he had evidently spooked her more than she had him. "Hey, sorry about that, babe! Didn't see you there." Penny's eyes and lips twitched.

_Am I breathing yet? _She had been staring for who knows how long now. It was long enough to cause Seaweed to wave his hand in front of her face, in hopes of wiping that look of having just seen a ghost off of her expression.

"O-oh! It's okay. It's, uh my bad, sorry! I'll just you know, go over," She looked around, jumpy. "-- ther--!" He silenced her with a wave of his hand and then a smile. She was visibly confused now.

"_We_ have a dancing lesson to finish," The emphasized _we_ made her jaw drop to the floor. Dancing with him was wonderful, even if she couldn't really call herself a suitable partner. Penny hesitated, stepped towards him, and then halted, her eyes suddenly clouded with worry and nervousness. "What's up?" Seaweed tilted his head a little.

"Waaaaaaait! _Wait!_" Penny was about a quarter-inch from causing a scene, _again_. "What time is it?" She asked, in a rush.

Seaweed, puzzled by her mood swing, looked over at the clock mounted on the wall. "Fifteen till eight. Why?" Penny shrieked, causing quite a few people to look over at Seaweed and her.

"Mom's gonna _kill _me!" Penny appeared entirely defeated as she paced for a few seconds, stopped, and then began again. She glanced up at a very perplexed Seaweed. "I'm sorry, but I really gotta go!" She pressed her right hand to her forehead miserably. _Mom's probably got the entire police department on our front lawn_.

"Hey, it's cool," Seeing her so anxiety-stricken left Seaweed with only one choice, and that was to try and calm her down a little. "I'll walk you home."

As much as the idea appealed to Penny, she knew he couldn't. Her mother was psychotic, crazy, judgmental, extreme, and more notably, extremely racist. She couldn't risk her lashing out at Seaweed for something silly like her missed curfew, and that was only if she was in a good mood. The last thing she wanted was for him to cross paths with her. It was a definite death sentence.

"That would be gr--" She trailed off, so close to going against her better judgment that it made her chest ache. "Iâ€¦ thanks!" Seaweed looked hopeful almost, and that crushed her spirit. She stared gloomily at her feet, as she placed her box-purse over her shoulder. "But, I'll be okay." Penny watched as the damage she had done set in. Seaweed was a pro at looking cool about it all, but the teenager wasn't a slow reader. "Thanks forâ€¦ everything. I haven't had this much fun in, like, forever!" _Really. _She went on to say with uncanny optimism, as she backed up one pace. "I hope I can come back sometime."

"Yeah, of course." Seaweed forced a smile. He was thrilled that she would even think that, but a bit wounded from the blow he thought that she intended with the walk home bit. Penny stared at the door and then over to him.

"See you later, thenâ€¦ I guess," She stood there for an abnormally long time before waving her fingers sheepishly, and walking out, completely forgetting to say goodbye to Tracy, her mother, Ms. Maybelle, or L'il Inez. She was too busy worrying that she had just severed all possible ties with Seaweed. Could she really help it? It wasn't a crime that she didn't want him to be burned at the stake by her mother.

She sighed, _God knows he doesn't deserve anymore of that._

Sick of wallowing in what she assumed to be self-pity, she continued her walk home alone, her conscience raking her feelings raw. It was hard to imagine that she would still have to face an incredibly tweaked Prudy Pingleton after all of this, too. It was like pouring salt on the wounds all over again.

* * *

><p>Kelsey Rose: Blame my friend, Shea, if the ending kills the mood! Don't worry, ladies and gents, the heat's in the process of turning up as we speak. R&R! Much love to you all.

3. Just to Sit Still Would Be A Sin

****Kelsey Rose****: Boo! It's me, again! Many thanks to all of you readers and reviewers, and to Anna and Shea for their interesting

ideas and help with the proofreading process. It makes things go more smoothly and quickly. Hugs and kisses!

****Disclaimer****: Sadly, I do not own Hairspray, or any of its characters. They are not mine in any way, shape, or fashion. I don't own the script, either. Nothing is mine.

* * *

><p>Chapter Three:

_Just to Sit Still Would Be A Sin _

It was an interesting thing, coming home to find your mother with a ridiculously large butcher knife in hand. She hadn't even tried to say something like, _oh, just cutting the grass _or _darned salesmen and their false insurance plans. _Not in the slightest! It was all about scaring the hell out of Penny yet again with her mental institution-worthy antics.

She awoke that morning to find her mother standing at the foot of her bed, cleaning a kitchen knife with an old dishrag. Now, if that wasn't scarring, then who knows _what _is?

"Mom!" Penny screeched and tumbled over and out of her bed, hitting the floor less harshly than she really could have. She grimaced and sighed, trying to keep herself from having a major heart attack. Last night hadn't been the best round of sleep she had ever gotten. Thoughts, feelings, people, fears, and working on a protest sign had kept her awake much later than she had initially intended.

"No daughter of mine is going to sleep past seven o'clock in the morning! Get up! Up, up, up!" As if anticipating that the knife could be used for more than just kitchen duties, Penny sprang to her feet and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. If her mother claimed it was 7 AM, that meant it was actually about a quarter till. She mumbled quietly and stared at Prudy, who held the most cliché, overly protective mother look conceivable. "Now, Penny, you knew where ignoring your curfew would get you. Staying out all night with that bad influence friend of yours, or whatever." She gestured a free hand vainly.

"_Tracy's_ not a bad influence, Ma," Penny stated rather passively, as she moved over to her small vanity to search for a hairbrush. This was a typical morning conversation for them.

"Well then, I suppose I don't have to ask whose fault it is for your being punished, _again_," Prudy finished cleaning the knife and placed her right hand against her hip defensively. She appeared to be in the midst of asking another question or saying something else that was redundant when Penny, much to her displeasure, began to recall her arrival at home at 8 PM last night. It _still_ gave her the creepsâ€|

* * *

><p>FLASHBACK

Summoning up all of her nerves, Penny walked guiltily towards her front lawn. It took less than a fraction of a second before Prudy

came darting from the steps, butcher knife in hand, to her daughter.

"Penny Lou Pingleton!" Prudy squawked, the wrinkles in her face hinting at just how unbelievably furious she was. "Young lady, you get over here this instant!" Without any second thoughts, she did so. For now, she just had to just lie low and pray that she had gotten at least _a little _better at lying.

"Yes, mother?" Penny was almost afraid to ask, but she knew it was inescapable. The older woman used her empty hand to grab a hold of her daughter's nearest earlobe to pull her over the rest of the way. "Ow, owâ€| ow! Whaaaat?"

"You know darn well what! I was about to call the FBI, Penny Lou! The _FBI_!" It was easy to tell where Penny got some of her quirks, huh? The teenager heaved a sigh. There was really no excuse for being an hour late, was there? "Well, what do you have to say for yourself? Andâ€| young lady, where are your _glasses_? Those weren't cheap, you know!" So many questions, so little time.

"Mom, Iâ€|" She bit her tongue, as her mother finally released her ear. "Tracy just thought it'd be neat if we checked out this hip, new place downtown. I guess I sorta lost track of ti--"

"An hour, Penny! An _hour_!"

"I _knoooooow_, mother," Penny rolled her eyes. Just as Prudy was about to object to such a response, the redhead cut in again. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again," She said in that classic, meaningless way, as she eyed the knife uneasily. "Andâ€| you can put the knife down."

Mrs. Pingleton scoffed and put the knife back in its holder on the multi-purpose belt that hugged her waist. Penny was never exaggerating when she talked of how insane her mom was.

"You're right. It _won't_ happen again, because, as of right now, you will only leave this house for school, and _that's it_. Straight there, and straight back. Do you understand me?"

_But, the protest! _Penny opened her mouth to complain, but Prudy held up her hand to silence her. "Uh uh! I'm looking for a 'yesâ€|'"

She surrendered, letting her shoulders fall in defeat. "Yes, ma'am." Prudy smiled widely and pat her on the back, edging her towards the house.

"Come on, now. Your supper's already cold, Penny. But, that shouldn't be a problem. It's vegetarian meatloaf!" Penny could feel her lunch turning over in her stomach. "It's best that way, dear." Just before they went inside, she studied her daughter. "But don't think of this as a treat or anything. Because as soon as you're finished, it's off to bed with you, missy."

_Don't have to worry about that one, Ma, _**trust**_ me_â€|

END FLASHBACK

* * *

> <p>"Penny? Penny Pingleton! I asked you a question!" Her mom's irritated voice thrust her from her thoughts and back into her room again.<p>

"Huh?" As soon as it left her mouth, Penny knew that was the wrong answer. "Iâ€| what did you say again, Mom? I sort of spaced out for a second." She was still brushing her hair, and had been for quite some time now. Prudy tossed her hands up in annoyance.

"I _said, _'What is this 'hip, new place' that you were going on about last night, anyway?'" Penny stopped in mid-brush to stare at her mother in the mirror before her. _Uh oh._

"It'sâ€| a record shop." The red, neon lights of a warning sign went up instantly with Mrs. Prudy Pingleton.

"Any _boys_?" Penny froze. "_Colored music_?" The younger girl had refused to respond to that, which only lit the flame to her mother's anger and suspicion. "Well, Miss Delinquent, you are in _big_ trouble now!" She grabbed Penny's wrist. Luckily, it wasn't the one with the hairbrush, which just so happened to still be in her hair. "Take a bath, get dressed, and get started on your chores. I need some time to think of a fitting punishment for such a troublesome teenager." She began to walk out of the room, only stopping briefly to call over her shoulder. Apart from her temper, she was still a mother, a mother who wasn't about to face any lawsuits for 'severe' mistreatment of her child. "There's toast and jam on the table and soy milk in the fridge. Now, get moving!"

Once her mom shut the door, she went over to her bed and flopped down, stomach-first. Her pillow became a savior to conceal her loud and infuriated grumbles. Her mother was too talented at pushing all the wrong buttons.

One thing was still standing, irrespective of anything Prudy could say or do about it: she was _going_ to be there with Tracy and the others. One million Prudy Pingleton's armed with guns wouldn't keep her from that. It was something that called to her, spoke straight to her heart. And, glancing over the edge, the sight of her freshly made poster sticking out from beneath her bed only strengthened the meaning and significance of being there for this, and for them.

'_Segregation never. Integration now!'_

Penny smiled. Getting past Mother Goose wasn't going to be any simple task, but she had a few tricks up her sleeve. She wanted to help liberate those people, to possibly share their smiles when they would finally be free of moral, political, and racial slander. She wanted to see that same, momentous brink of emotion on Seaweed's face, also. The thought sent a shiver of what felt like electricity through her body.

Sitting up on her bed, she stared distractedly into her vanity's mirror, a pillow clutched soothingly against her chest. Even from her place on the bed, she caught the faint appearance of a blush creeping up on her cheeks. Evidently, she was in more deeply than she originally thought.

* * *

>Needless to say, the morning at Motormouth Maybelle's household was far more relaxed than the Pingleton's. Seaweed, Inez, and their mother were all enjoying a festive meal together at the kitchen table. There had been a heated discussion about today's main activity: the protest, which was just two hours, give or take, away. The youngest one, however, seemed set on bothering her older brother, which called for interesting and abrupt subject changes.<p><p>

"Looked like Seaweed was having some fun last night, Mama," She remarked slyly, as she glanced over at her sibling.

"Really, baby? I didn't notice," Ms. Maybelle teased, slipping her son an animated smile. Seaweed shot his sister a playful sort of glare before taking a sip of his coffee.

"You and Ma both are so hung up on details," He said lightly, with a smile, as he leaned back in his chair.

"Got a new _giiiiirlfriend_?" Little sisters always had to be annoying, didn't they?

"Girl had to learn to dance from _someone_," Their mother commented cheerfully, even though it basically interrupted Seaweed and stole away his chance to say some sort of sassy, yet brotherly retort to L'il Inez. It was a gentle taunt, as Ms. Maybelle found Penny especially endearing. She was very different, in her ownâ€| _special_ way.

The trio shared a small laugh together before Seaweed spoke of going to his room to finish getting dressed for the day. It was a lie, considering he only lacked shoes and a button-up shirt over his white undershirt. All the same, he was excused with no argument, as astounding as that was.

As he entered his room, he felt as though a harsh wind of reality pushed forward, as if to knock him off his feet. They were really going through with this. His Mama had been an active motivator for many movements, but something about this one was more personal. Why? He had no clue.

Seaweed grabbed a bright green shirt and put it on at his leisure. He had been so distracted at breakfast, or, he supposed, ever since last night. His family had undoubtedly noticed, but they were too enthralled with the protest to harass him about it anymore than they already had. He, too, was pumped about the game plan for today - don't get me wrong, but his sub-conscience was constantly on the prowl, which left him irritated about something completely unknown to him.

He was letting a _girl _really get to him. And that meant _really_ get to him. He had told himself over and over again that she was different. She wasn't another, snobby white girl with a plastic smile out to rob him of his pride and dignity. No damage was meant by last night's 'rejection.' And, anyway, it wasn't that big of a deal.

Butâ€¦ then, why did she turn him down flat? Seaweed fiddled with his shirt collar, and then rubbed at his face with one hand. _Whoa. _He was seriously over-analyzing everything. The boy managed a tiny, fool of a grin, as he grabbed his shoes, sat down, and began to put them on.

She's _just_ Penny: different, quirky, melodramatic, a little spastic, but not a pinch harmful. There was no deeper meaning (that he could grasp and accept, at the moment, at least), and he needed to stop annoying himself by digging for one.

* * *

>"Where is she?" Tracy said restlessly, as she stood amongst a group of protesters. Mrs. Turnblad, who was standing directly beside her, looked at her with an eyebrow raised.

"You've been friends with Penny for how long, and you're surprised that the girl is _late_?" Her daughter cut her a serious stare.

"Ma!"

"Oh, Tracy, she'll be here!"

Almost as though she were trained to arrive on cue, Penny came rushing in, with multiple signs in her arms and a couple of people behind her in the same condition. Breathless, she distributed some of the signs, while keeping her specially made one for herself.

"Sooooorry, Tracy! My bedroom window is further down than I rememberedâ€¦" Her friend nodded understandably, just relieved that she, though extremely out of breath, had made it.

Penny stared at the crowd with optimistic eyes. He had to be hereâ€¦ right? She bit her lip fearfully as the people around her readied themselves and began a steady march towards the studio doors. Several times she thought she saw him, but she could never be certain, and that really set her on fire with a fresh collection of excessive nerves.

Then, her notions from earlier crackled in her ears like a deafening blow of thunder. This was for them; this was for _him_. She straightened herself just as they reached the main area of the studio and lifted her sign high and proud, as she joined the chorus of protesters:

"Two, four, six, eight -- TV's got to integrate! Two, four, six, eight -- TV's got to integrate!"

It continued on and on, as other variations entered the fray. Everything was a colossal haze of syllables and sounds. It was psychobabble as far as she was aware.

"Quick! Call the cops!"

"Black is beautiful!"

"Stay away! This isn't Negro Day!"

"Integration, not segregation!"

"â€| TV's got to integrate!"

"Segregation today; segregation tomorrow; segregation
forever!"

Things went from risky to dangerously chaotic really quickly. The howling sound of police sirens and raised voices sent everyone into a hysterical frenzy. Penny even found herself playing a vicious game of tug-of-war with a familiar Council girl over her protest poster. Furrowing her eyebrows and baring her teeth angrily, she held her own. The girl, Brenda, shared Penny's heated gaze, but there was an indication of something else in her eyes. Just as she felt an authoritative-type pressure of someone gripping her on the shoulders, she caught the hilt of Brenda's poison.

"Negro lover!"

All of her muscles were drained of their strength at once, even while she was being hauled away. The officers had apprehended all of those they could manage to catch in the fray. Penny was eventually herded into the back of a police van with several of the other women. Still, the fact that she was actually going to jail paled in comparison to what she had just heard. It absolutely broke her heart. The twinge that she felt gathering in her stomach and chest was too much. She felt as though she had to swallow hard to keep from retching, even. Something about that simple, toxic phrase just made her want to cry her eyes out. It wasn't because she was ashamed or embarrassed of the association, but because of utterly how filthy and disgusting it was. How did Seaweed and the others handle this every day? She drew her legs and arms to herself.

They were so much better than that. So, so much better.

* * *

>Kelsey Rose: Stuff really happens to your writing when you listen to certain songs. Sorry for the chapter's shortnessâ€| the next'll be longer, I'm sure. July 20th is nearing! Hugs, hugs, kisses, kisses -- R&R!

4. The Chances That We Take

****Kelsey Rose****: Yo! Sorry, guys. I've been so excited about the Hairspray movie, getting my costume (oh, shush!) together, and listening to the movie soundtrack, that I haven't been showing my story as much love as I should be. Don't worry, though! I am definitely not losing interest, especially after this chapter. This is where it gets goooooood for me. ;) Mwahaha. Oh, and on a really fun note: mama, I'm a redhead now! Yes, sirree. I love it!

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><p>Chapter Four:

_The Chances That We Take _

Seaweed had been there, but that was a given. In the midst of the insanity of the protest, he hadn't really seen hide or hair of his mother or little sister, or of Penny or Tracy and the others. He had hung back with a few of the boys, being the team that sort of watched out and acted as a silent defense, in a way. He yelled and held his own proudly, just as his peers did. But, this was Mother-Daughter Day, so he had to be careful. While Motormouth and Inez qualified on a technical stance to be there, he wasn't exactly gender-appropriate. Yet, none of that mattered now.

For once in his life he felt completely powerless. Watching the police arrest his family and friends, there was literally nothing he could do about it. Playing the part of the hero wouldn't get him anywhere. Jail, maybe, but anything else was a brave, albeit hopeless cause. He itched so terribly to reach out to them and help, but he knew that he could play a better role than that. Anyway, it wasn't his Mama or L'il Inez that he was really worried about. Motormouth Maybelle was an exceptionally strong woman, and was more than able to handle her own. Hell, if she wanted to, she could protect every last person in a jailhouse. Tracy and Inez, he was certain, would be fine, as well. It was Penny that bore the chief sum of his worry.

As he and his remaining friends escaped the scene, he just barely caught a flash of that devastatingly familiar red hair. Judging by how she was being hauled away, she had either just gotten creamed in a spat, or was recovering from some sort of blow. His very short glance didn't give many profitable details, and for that he was damn sorry.

With little else to do, he was forced to head home and conjure up a scheme, a back-up plan, if you will, should the others have some type of problem freeing themselves from jail. It was his first, personal step towards making up for what he just couldn't accomplish that day, even if he knew that any and every idea was basically pointless.

* * *

>If you asked Penny Pingleton what jail was like two days ago, she wouldn't be able to tell you a lick of information. And, even though she was now a resident 'criminal,' she still couldn't accurately describe it. Scary, terrifying, dirty, large, and full of hormonal women? Well, that worked. She had stayed close to Tracy since their arrival, slowly winding down from her emotional and strangely conscious kind of coma. Even now, though, there was a clawing sensation bubbling inside of her, but - at the present - she felt capable of controlling it. Having a mental breakdown in jail just didn't seem like such a good idea. <p>"They seem pretty nice," Penny commented optimistically to Tracy as she hung on to her friend's arm, gazing around at the fair-sized group of women, some more clothed than others. Tracy said nothing, so the redhead shied away to her thoughts, thus turning her back to the bars for the moment. It was clueless mistake number one, for as the matron strode by, her bunch of keys trailed almost purposefully against Penny's backside, quite literally causing her to yelp and jump forward what seemed like twenty feet.<p>

The matron snickered, thinking of how wonderful it was for someone to appear so excited to see her. Penny wheezed and eventually recoiled back to Tracy.

"All right, ladies, welcome to the _Big Dollhouse_!" The scary, middle-aged lady screeched, her nightstick waving about lazily between her two hands. "For those of you new to the Baltimore Women's House of Detention, I'm letting you know now that I don't stand for no boozin', dopin', gamblin', fightin' or any other kind of unladylike behavior." It was at that moment that every female behind the bars had the pleasure of witnessing the matron grab at her own crotch, before swiftly turning around to peer in at them. The disgusted faces had to disappear on impulse. Well, all but Amber and Velma von Tussle's, that is. Finishing with a threatening, "Think of me as a motherâ€| who eats her young!" Penny could feel herself shrink back. This was horrible. Really, it was. It was almost as bad as her mother, butâ€| not _quite_.

There was no time to talk to or learn anything of these convicted women, and, in all honesty, that didn't bother Penny at all. She was so scared, silently furious, and unsure, that she kept near those who were familiar to her, and whom she favored most. Generally, that intended that she hung with Tracy, or maybe even Inez or Motormouth. With all the fussing and carrying on, the fact that she had barely said a word wasn't a problem.

Amber whined about her clothes and about herself in general. Velma shared her daughter's sympathy while rewarding herself with mounds and mounds of self-indulgence. Edna and Ms. Maybelle seemed to long for male company, and _who could blame them_? Penny would blush and say otherwise before she admitted to the face _she _wished to see again.

By orders of the disturbing matron, they were forced to exercise. It wasn't so bad, until she caught the woman peering at each lady and girl with a robust glint in her eyes. Awkward wouldn't even begin to describe what she felt; it was more like _violated._ But, she kept a stiff upper lipâ€| for a few seconds.

"No fair!" Inez was the first to complain. Then came Miss Edna.

"No _food_!"

"No _fun_!" Penny finished up and appeared to generate a harmonica out of thin air. In actuality, she just carried it around with her sometimes, kind of like some personal, lame keepsake, but a keepsake nonetheless. Before many seconds passed, her lower lip twitched, while she set a look of aggravation on her face. Then, without warning, and before she could really tend to her harmonica, Tracy rushed to her, desperation in her voice.

"Penny! I can't take all of this waiting!" The smaller girl felt as though she were required to stare at the brunette with waving defiance. _She_ was tired of waiting? It was _her_ plan that got them here in the first place. "I've lost my man!" Oh, _right_â€| Link. She fought with herself inwardly to at least try and sum up her usual, overflowing amount of empathy. Nevertheless, as Tracy brought up the bit about her hair deflating, that was it.

_The hair. _Penny held back a scoff and looked dead into her best friend's eyes.

"Well, Tracy, I hate to grumble or grouse, butâ€¦" A roar of voices seemed to join her as they pounded against the wide-eyed, teenaged, local celebrity.

"It's _your _fault that we're in this big dollhouse!"

After that, things didn't get any better. It was kind of like reality television, being that it was only a downward tumble to hell from there. Several of the longtime prison women suggested bail and whatnot, but that just put fuel on the fire. It seemed like everyone was arguing with someone about something or another. And, currently, Penny had shared so many uncomfortable glances with hookers and whatever else that she wondered why her cheeks wouldn't just permanently paint themselves a perky shade of pink.

While a verbal quarrel amongst Edna, Tracy, and Velma occurred, Penny became loosely aware of the sound of a door opening. Seeing as how she was already slumped against the bars of the cell, she easily lifted her head, harmonica between her lips, to see who was coming. It was a man--the guard! She perked up straight away, nearly sucking in her harmonica as she did so.

"Von Tussle, Velma? Von Tussle, Amber?" He called. Penny pouted angrily. Amber, however, pushed past everyone else to move closer to the guard.

"That's us!"

"Ladies, you're free to go with the sincere apologies of the state of Maryland. And, the personal compliments of the governor himself." He dipped his head slightly to the pair as he routinely unlocked the cell door and let the two blondes out. The mother and daughter looked as plastic and uncaring as usual. Penny was too infuriated and disappointed to pay Velma's mini-monologue about sweet, chubby Governor Millard any mind. She really could care less, and it was amazing just how much she could do so. Amber puffed out her chest, and smoothed down her near flawless locks of hair.

"I was never here. This never happened," She recited, to herself, Penny supposed. At that time, she turned to Tracy and produced a condescending grin. "Oh, Tracy. Any message for Link? Place it on my lips, and I'll be sure he gets it!"

Tracy flinched and fumed, and Penny tossed her a very sympathetic glance. She couldn't even imagine what it was like to be so close to having someone, and then have the carpet pulled right out from under you by some stereotypically stunning blue-eyed blonde. It had to be _awful._

Good came from their leave, though. The place was a whole lot roomier and nicer! Or, wellâ€¦ as nice as prison got, anyway.

â€¦ and the surprises and pleasantries would just continue to pop out of the strangest places. When the guard returned a few minutes later, Mr. Turnblad soon followed behind. The main message relayed by the guard was a prominent and unbelievable relief all in one: '_bail has been posted_' Penny jumped up and down on her heels and squealed

quietly to Tracy, who was preoccupied and shocked. When no one else was really celebrating, Miss Pingleton figured she had better join the majority.

The story was that Tracy's dad had posted bail by mortgaging his prized joke shop. His generosity and passion for his family and their friends was overwhelmingly kind, but Penny had always adored Mr. Turnblad. There was a very charismatic atmosphere that came with speaking to him, and she enjoyed his jokes, however corny and, at times, unfunny they were. But, now that he had done this, her respect for him had multiplied by a trillion, at least.

Following after a beaming Motormouth Maybelle and her daughter, she realized that the only one left in the cell was Tracy. That was when the matron stopped Wilbur from reaching the big-haired teenager.

"Hold it right there. We're keeping that crowd brainwasher right here." Everyone, especially Penny, was absolutely stunned. Tracy and she locked eyes with one another fretfully.

"But I paid for everyone! I got a group discount," Wilbur tried, but the old woman wasn't having it.

"Change your coupon back on your way outâ€¦ 'cause here it says that: 'Miss Turnblad is herewith and forthwith withheld, without bail. She is to be moved to solitary confinement, and held there until further notice by special order of the governor's office.' So, there." She didn't care. This was all business to her.

Tracy seethed. "The governor's office? Mrs. Von Tussle! Manipulating our judicial system just to win a contest is un-American!" The matron shrugged and began to usher Penny and the rest of them away.

"Don't make things worse. Move out peacefully. And hurryâ€¦ I'm growin' old here." Wilbur Turnblad frowned, but then looked boldly at her.

"I'm not going anywhere without my daughter."

Tracy shook her head in response before the matron could snap back with a saucy retort. "It's okay, daddy. They can't keep me here forever. Besides, I've gotta lot to think about. I might as well do it in solitary refinement." Her father sighed, and the old matron grumbled irritably.

"I'm countin' to three, and then I'm re-arresting you all for illegal trespass." That was a definite sign to go. Penny's expression darkened. She hated the idea of leaving Tracy here by herself, but there was nothing to be done about it. Moving away from the exit, she toddled over to Tracy, automatically tuning everyone else's goodbyes out as she prepared for her own. _Okay, Penny, your best friend's gonna be stuck in jail, and you don't know for how longâ€¦ think smart! _Her turn came before she knew it, and thus came a less than appropriate collection of words.

"You are _so_ lucky to get out of the Algebra final!" She grasped her hands for a second before frowning and following the others out of the prison. It was strange how she didn't exactly feel that marvelous sentiment of freedom as she left the place behind. Walking amidst

Motormouth Maybelle, L'il Inez, and Tracy's parents, she actually felt more trapped than ever.

"Penny?"

She snapped her head and looked over to the one who called her name, Mrs. Turnblad. "Ma'am?"

"Wilbur and I'll take you home, hon." Penny smiled a little.

"That's all right, Miss Edna. My house shouldn't be too far from here. Besides, I don't think you wanna be around when my mom finds out aboutâ€¦ you know," She cringed somewhat. Inez and Ms. Maybelle watched her silently, and even a little curiously, at the mentioning of her mother. Edna rolled her eyes and huffed, knowing Prudy far too well.

"Okay, dear, be careful."

Careful? She could try, butâ€¦ going back home meant leaving one jail and returning to a _slightly_ more lavish prison.

* * *

>For the past few hours or so, Seaweed had fumbled agitatedly about his house. As far as plans to bust the girls out of jail went, he was at a loss. There was really no 'proper' way, given that it was a criminal offense no matter how anyone looked at it. He was beyond frustration, and even more so when he finally got himself to sit down and really think about today. <p>On the surface, things couldn't have started out more perfectly. The protesters had assembled and successfully broken into the studio. That was when the trouble began. He knew from the moment that he couldn't reach his mother and sister, that the events were destined to cascade into a horrible pitfall. As expected, catfights, verbal arguments, and physical violence were on the rise. That inevitably took him back to thoughts of his two family members and of the rest of the girls, more specifically: Penny. The final images of her being towed away into some cheap police van really stuck with him, and only worsened his mood.<p>

"Baby, what's wrong with you?" Called a well-known voice, shaking Seaweed from his momentary state of disorder.

"Mama!" He leapt up to his feet, surprised at the sight of his mother's entrance. The boy moved to catch her in a hug just as Inez appeared at her side. "What's goin' on? What happened?" Motormouth Maybelle embraced her son for a moment before muttering an annoyed sigh. Inez went and jabbed her brother in the side as a custom greeting while she took a seat on a nearby chair.

"Tracy's dad was kind enough to bail out the whole house, that's what," Ms. Maybelle said, sounding oddly irritated about something. Seaweed looked at her with clear concern.

"Ain't that a _good _thing, Ma?"

"Still doesn't finish the business, son," She stated tartly, the von Tussles evidently still fresh on her mind. "Believe me when I say this, boy: your Mama's damn glad to be outta that godforsaken place." That distinctive chuckle rang from the larger woman as she smiled

knowingly to Inez, who was thinking roughly the same thing. Seaweed couldn't help but grin a little.

"And everyone else?" He felt the urge to ask, just for personal confirmation. However, when Ms. Motormouth Maybelle's eyes narrowed, something stirred within him.

"All fine. 'cept for the fact that they've got poor Tracy under lockdown," She shook her head. "This ain't over, though, baby. And you can quote me on that one." All said and done, she caved for the time being, and went into the kitchen. Seaweed sat and looked over to his sister, initiating a caught stare between them. Even she could tell what was on his mind, and that caused her to smirk.

"If you wanted to ask Ma about your giiiiirlfriend, you shoulda just said something," Inez noted innocently, and continued on before Seaweed had any chance to reply. "She's okay. Had to run home to her mama real fast, though." The minute that her brother's gaze melted to one of legitimate confusion, she shrugged her shoulders and put up her hands defensively. "Hey, that's all I know." Seaweed balanced his chin against one of his hands.

"Yeah. Thanks, Inez," He said inattentively. She sighed, having never understood how her sibling ticked.

"I'm gonna go help Mama in the kitchen," She pushed herself up and soon disappeared into the next room, leaving him to his lonesome.

This was the second time that Penny had spoken of her mother in a hasty and troubled way. It was leading Seaweed to believe something about her that he was almost afraid to bring to mind. Either this girl had a psycho maniac for a mother, or she was as caged as she seemed to be. Or, was it both? Apart from everything, he didn't exactly like all of the events and scenarios that were unfolding in his mind. He had to do something. One missed chance was plenty for him. He felt so weirdly compelled to go to her, even with the evening slowly fading into pitch darkness. His decision was still set. So, standing up, he walked casually past the kitchen.

"I'm goin' out for a while, Ma." He called over his shoulder, as he neared the front door. Motormouth Maybelle scoffed and shuffled through a few more pots and pans.

"Boy, you'd better not be too late. We've got important company comin' over."

Acting as if it were a rhetorical statement, he simply left after that. He barely remembered a short description of what he assumed to be Penny's home, and only hoped that he could not only recall where it was, but that she had a ladder lying aroundâ€¦ _just in case._

* * *

>The scene with Penny's arrival was not a pretty one. Prudy had known precisely what her daughter had gotten into. News after news coverage proved that it was no lie. As a result, she had instantly gripped Penny by the wrist and began taking her upstairs to her room. <p>"You have really done it this time, young lady! Protesting, getting arrested, _and_ going to jail? And all for those darned

colored people, too!" She hissed and tightened her grip on the redhead's wrist as she forcefully coaxed her into her room. Penny grumbled to herself.

"Mooooom!"

"Don't _mom_ me!" When at last they were inside Penny's bedroom, her mother essentially shoved her onto her bed, where she then proceeded to tie her down with ropes. Penny was far above the grumbling process, and went straight to producing some sort of inept squeal as she was pushed and tied down.

"Penny Lou Pingleton, you are absolutely, positively, permanently punished," The older woman began naming off the offenses respectively as she tied a new knot. "This one's for being willful. This one's for being deceitful. This one's for being neglectful. And this one's forâ€¦" There was a long pause. "â€¦crying 'wee, wee, wee' all the way home!" She turned the bedside lamp towards Penny's face just as the phone rang from downstairs. Groaning, she tossed her hands up. "Why is it every time you tie your daughter up, the phone rings?"

Watching her mother leave, Penny began twitching beneath the ropes. They were itchy, for one, and for two: it was official; her Mama had finally lost every last marble she had. The redhead squirmed again and again, but her mother's lifetime membership with the loony bin meant airtight knots. This was totally unfair! What she had done today was right, and she was convinced at that with all of her heart. And yet here she was, tied to her bed, unable to see Tracy, her other friends, orâ€¦

Her eyes trailed pitifully towards her open window. They then shot open while her mouth formed a shocked, but incredibly ecstatic smile. "Seaweed!"

* * *

><p>Kelsey Rose: -chants- July 20th, July 20th, July 20th! I've seen every preview and extra there is out there, guys, and I have to say, I am pleasantly surprised, and so ready for my long countdown days to be over. Anyway, love to you all. R&R, and spread the love!

5. There's a Dream in the Future

****Kelsey Rose****: Guys, I am sooooo sorry about how long this update took me. I was so excited about the movie that I just totally blanked out. Yeah, I've seen it. :) Saw it four times on Opening Day. I've seen it about seven or eight times now, and will be watching it several more. It doesn't have the ****BAM**** of the stage show or of seeing it live, but who cares? I thought it was absolutely amazing! And the best part? It was the highest grossing of a musical ever! Our little Hairspray did it. I was so happy. I wasn't so thrilled about Zac Efron's scary fanbase, though. They wereâ€¦ less than a joy. But, at least I had Amanda, Elijah, and the pretty Council Members, Dancers, and Detention Kids to look at. Anywhoooo, here you are!

****Disclaimer****: Sadly, I do not own Hairspray, or any of its

characters. They are not mine in any way, shape, or fashion. I don't own the script, either. Nothing is mine.

* * *

><p>Chapter Five:

There's a Dream in the Future

"Penny! What happened?" Seaweed was taken aback that some of the images in his head seemed to be more real than he thought possible. Still, seeing Penny's pitiful facial expression was what ultimately got him through her window in a split second.

"My mother's punishing me for," She paused, getting on her best Prudy imitation that she could--which, amazingly, was pretty dead-on. "_going to jaaaail without peeeermisssssion_."

Seaweed chuckled once and then began fiddling with the ropes while she looked on with candid excitement. Since he couldn't quite handle the knot issue at the moment, he smiled smoothly to her. "_Oh, there it is againâ€¦_| _Despite the seriousness of the situation, she couldn't help but swoon to herself.

"Wellâ€¦_| I'm here to rescue the fair maiden from her tower." Yes, that soundedâ€¦_| _poetic_ enough, didn't it? Penny sighed dreamily, still squirming as she looked up at him.

"Oh, Seaweed! You _do_ care! I was worried it was just a lonely teenager's forbidden fantasyâ€¦_|" It wasn't breaking news that this girl believed herself to know the perfect thing to say. So it came out weirdly, but Seaweed found it all the more irresistible andâ€¦_| well, brilliantly like her.

_Of course _he cared; it was just sort of new for him. He was a charmer, that was for sure, but to be this attracted to a girl, it was veryâ€¦_| _nice _and enjoyably out of the ordinary.

"From the moment Iâ€¦_| saw you, Iâ€¦_| knew that evenâ€¦_| the colors of our skinâ€¦_| couldn't keep us apart. Butâ€¦_|" All during the sentence, he had been tugging and tugging, but to no avail. "_damn_, these knots are somethin' else." Penny bit down on her bottom lip anxiously.

"Hurry, Seaweed!"

That was when the idea hit him. Searching through his pockets, he soon whipped out his pocketknife. Penny kicked her legs eagerly as she stared at it.

"Livin' in the ghetto's got its perks, baby." He announced victoriously, as he began to cut away at the pesky ropes. The redhead turned on her side, just as fidgety as ever. That was when the circumstances really fleshed out for her: she was now _alone_ in _her room _with a _boy_--and a very special boy, at that. He had actually come to help her. She could hardly believe it. It all seemed so unreal.

A colossal reaction of happiness exploded from Penny as she was freed. She edged coyly to the foot of her bed to reach him. Staring

into his eyes, her shyness almost melted away all at once. Not even a tinge of pink crawled onto her cheeks. Complete exposure and the showing of a weakness didn't even faze her at all.

Grasping onto his hands, she watched as their fingers twined. They just seemed to mesh so well together! And, if she was being a nerd for thinking that, then so be it. The stupid grin on Penny's face didn't even cross her mind anymore. Both were fully enveloped in the moment.

Gradually, she drew her hands back from his. She ended up smirking and moving herself further back while coaxing him to join her on the bed. Those timeless few fingers used in that 'come hither' fashion were put into immediate action. It was quite possibly the dorkiest move in the history of the universe, but neither of them were in the mood to care, or even notice.

Barely hesitating, Seaweed joined her. Both had moved to get comfortable and lie down, him easily using one arm to prop himself up over her. They locked eyes again, and that was when Penny's face grew hot. He looked to be closing the space between the two of them faster than she could think, and that worried her a little.

Like I've ever kissed a guy before! The butterflies in her stomach were having a mini-fiesta as she closed her eyes, trying to block out that one, awkward, not-even-real kiss she had way back in Kindergarten. Then again, little 'blocking out' was necessary when she finally felt the unusual sensation of his lips pressed against hers.

Instincts told her to take a chance and run for the hills, going all out with a fierce kiss in return. But, she was so nervous, that all she could really manage was to place one of her hands on the crook of his neck. It was amazing that she hadn't had a heart attack yet, because her heart was pounding away at millions of miles per hour. She thought for sure her cover would've been blown by now.

All right, to give Seaweed some credit, he caught every last vibe from Penny. He wasn't dense, and he figured, given her twitching and lack of response, how 'out of the ordinary' this must've been for her. So, slowly and tactfully, he lead her into another kiss, this time with a grace that actually got her to feel more comfortable and even so much as respond this time. It was increasingly sweet and extremely gentle. The passion and meaning behind it all was fully concrete. Penny could feel every single bit of it just by the way he held her, and helped to make sure that she was completely calm - or, as calm as calm got when you were on cloud twenty.

When the kiss eventually came to a fleeting hiatus, she giggled and hooked her index finger beneath his chin to bring him forward to place an adorable, quick peck on his lips.

"Oh, Seaweed," Penny was positive that she hadn't felt this happy in a long time. He really knew how to get under her skin and really make her smile; and she loved that. It was a much anticipated, wonderful change of events.

Balancing himself above her again, Seaweed grinned in that enchanting way of his that hitched her breath in her throat every time.

"Penny-"

Apparently, they hadn't heard the door fly open, or a traumatized Prudy Pingleton fly in.

"Oh my god!" Penny cringed as Seaweed and she both looked up and over at her mother. She had had tons of awkward moments in her life, but her mother walking in while Seaweed basically laid on top of herâ€¦ that was probably topping the charts right about now. "_Colored people in the house_. I'll _never_ sell it now!" Much to Penny's disbelief, her mom ran out of her room screaming. _Probably just to call the policeâ€¦_ She had only a moment to think before Seaweed whisked her to her feet and took her hand.

"C'mon. I'm takin' you back to my place," He said indefinitely. Penny blushed at the concept, but nodded and obediently followed him. She looked outside her window and down, noticing that he had managed to locate that old, rusty ladder.

"Seaweedâ€¦" She giggled cutely and trailed her eyes over to where he stood with an expression that clearly proclaimed 'what?'. "Thank you." He knew they were punched for time here, what with her psychotic mother waging war with the furniture downstairs, but he immediately put a pause on his thoughts for their leave when she said that. He pulled her towards him.

"What for, babe?" Penny blinked, having not expected that she would have to justify herself any further.

"Justâ€¦ you know," She moved her feet about timidly. "Iâ€¦" This was harder than she thought. "Well, I meannnnâ€¦" All she wanted to say was thank you for being here, and, especially, for caring. Seaweed grinned and rested his hands on either of her hips, causing her to look up at him once more. He then stole the opportunity to place another kiss on her lips.

Penny _still_ _couldn't_ get used to those weird sparks she felt every time he did that.

"I get it," He smiled, taking her hand. Shuffling noises were heard from downstairs, along with Prudy's ample shouts. Both of them were immediately pushed off of their romantic cloud.

Seaweed jerked his head towards the window. "C'mon, now. Let's jet outta here before your Mama gets back." Penny nodded and climbed out of the window, soon descending down the ladder. And, once he was sure that she was well on her way down, Seaweed glanced back at Penny's bedroom door and began climbing down after her.

They met up again at the bottom of the ladder, where Penny had waited for him. Seaweed took hold of her left hand, winked to her, and then took off with her towards Ms. Maybelle's record shop, only vaguely taking note of Prudy's loud, "Peeeeeeeeee-nnnnnnnnyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!" from back at her house. He didn't need any more confirmation, anyway. That was one psychotic mother that he didn't need to get involved with.

* * *

>After sprinting a few blocks, they finally slowed things down to a cautious walk, even if it was mainly due to Penny's complaints about

how she wasn't allowed to perspire. Either way, Seaweed didn't exactly mind slowing down to at least somewhat enjoy their stroll together. <p>He had kept her close to him, one arm protectively around her shoulders, and Penny thought she would die at the intoxicating smell of whatever it was he was wearing. Was it cologne? She really didn't know. But, whatever it was, she was about one step away from a very personal meeting with the pavement.<p>

"Penny?" She blinked her eyes open to rid them of their glazed look, and then gazed up at him.

"Huh?"

"Is sheâ€| always thatâ€| crazy?" Seaweed asked carefully, not really knowing how to put it.

"What? Who?" Penny tilted her head. She had spaced out more than she thought. "My mom?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Oooooohhhh." There was a lot that could be said about that. She wrinkled her nose a little. "We _do_ have this one room downstairs. It's got beds, food, water, gas masks, Russian language booksâ€|" She added intriguingly while one of her eyebrows twitched upward. "Don't really know why, though." Seaweed withdrew his questionable and slightly disturbed expression and gave her shoulders a tender squeeze. "She's not _sooo_ bad," Penny felt like she could afford a huge understatement (_flat-out lie _). It did keep the mood light, in the end. "'cept for when she maybeâ€| starts caringâ€| _too much_."

_Oh, is _that _what she calls it? _Seaweed didn't say a word about how he really felt. Besides actually being a bit--_more like a lot--scared of Penny's mother, he hated the way she treated her. He knew for a straight fact that Penny didn't deserve any bit of that, and he was glad to get her away from all of that nonsense, even for only one night.

"Well, tonight, darlin', you'll be treated like the princess you are," He cooed softly into her ear, causing her to blush a steamy shade of pink. _And maybe get a dance lesson or two_, he mused to himself, a grin setting upon his features.

Penny found that the corners of her lips were beginning to ache from smiling so much. It was so out of this world to even begin to think that they were actuallyâ€| _together_. He was so beyond amazing, _and _he was interested in her. Who got hit with a brick and gave her this fantastic gift?

* * *

>The setting at Motormouth Maybelle's record shop wasn't without severe anxiety. The regulars were with her, watching the news for any updates on Tracy. Though, the DJ herself had another thing on her mind: just where was her baby boy? He had said he'd be back soon, and yet he was nowhere in sight. And, as worried and sympathetic as she was for Tracy, she couldn't help but have Seaweed on her mind, also. It wasn't safe out there tonight, particularly with the police on such high alert.

"It's a mess out there," Motormouth Maybelle traced her eyes across the window, and then towards the teenagers standing around the small television.

"Good night for a jailbreak," One girl said bluntly as she walked around the table and then leaned against it. Lorraine, another one of the girls present, shot up on the dime.

"Ms. Motormouth, look! Now it's on Channel 2! They're sayin' that, 'Tracy Turnblad has escaped from prison.' They think she was helped by Link Larkin. It's all over the news!" Others shook their heads and mumbled, while the head honcho just sighed and crossed her arms. Tonight was already trying as is. Now even more was being shoved onto the platter.

"Lord have pity! It's a crazy city!" Ms. Maybelle declared, jumping slightly as she heard something over her shoulder. "Who's at the backdoor?" It was then that Seaweed burst in with Penny shuffling after him, her hand still clasped in his. Motormouth Maybelle breathed a heavy sigh of relief and smiled the biggest smile that any loving mother could muster. "My baby!" It was so good to know that he was safe. Though, her eyes soon fell on the quirky, young redhead. "Andâ€¦ Penny, is it?"

"Yes, ma'am." She replied hastily, squeezing Seaweed's hand as a reflex action. Inez jumped forward, delighted at the idea to embarrass her older sibling again.

"Seaweed's got a girlfriend!"

One cutting look with his eyes seemed to slice through her words, but she still looked just as difficult and defiant as ever.

"Is it okay I brought her home? I had to get her away from her crazyass Mama," Penny quivered at the notion. Prudy could have very well gotten the cops to savagely beat Seaweed, or whatever it was that police did to 'perpetrators,' and that would have been god awful. She felt much safer here, and the company was very well met, too. All the same, when Seaweed's mother smiled in response to her son's explanation, Penny noticed that a very significant weight had been lifted from her heart.

"I never mind love. It's a gift from above. But, be careful, 'cause there's a lotta ugly comin' at you," Whether she planned to continue or not, Penny found a reply spilling out of her mouth unintentionally.

"It's okay!" She said, very casual. "My mother's gonna kill me, anyway." Lorraine laughed and thumbed idly through a few records before turning towards Penny and Seaweed.

"No, she won't. She'll kill him." Before anyone could answer, a loud knock sounded from the door. Ms. Maybelle was just about to open it when Link Larkin dashed in with Tracy. Gasps were plainly heard, and Penny instantly left the shelter of Seaweed's embrace to run to her out-of-breath best friend. Link was in the same condition, even if the faint tint of lip gloss shone from the corners of his lips.

"Hey, Ms. Motormouth! We broke Tracy out of jail," He breathed, and the others just tossed their hands up.

"Yeah, we heard." The majority chorused, causing the boy to blink, confused. Several others offered, "It's all over the news!" before retreating back to Maybelle or the TV to watch for more updates. Tracy sighed.

"The jailbreak was easy compared to getting a cab to this side of town." Penny held onto Tracy's hand more tightly.

Motormouth Maybelle tossed Tracy one of those very maternal and sympathetic looks and then placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Well, we still gotta get busy. Only twenty-four hours till Miss Hairspray, and it's gonna be on National TV." She stated firmly, her hand slipping off of Tracy and to her side. The woman gazed solemnly around the shop. "We may never get another chance like this. And, this time we'll start by getting Corny and the guards at the studio to help us." The kids smirked to themselves and looked to one another, rather liking the idea. Penny leapt up on her heels and tapped Tracy on the shoulder.

"Oh, oh! Maybe your dad could help, too! Sometimes he has ideas." She nodded excitedly, her jaw smacking away at a new piece of gum. It was a little something to hopefully calm her down, keep her quiet -- or maybe even both.

"No!" Tracy tensed up and stared gravely at the floor. "I've got to turn myself in!" With a resonating 'no' from nearly everyone, the teenager pushed forward.

"I can't put any of you in any more danger! My daddy could lose his shop. Link, you could go to prison. And, Penny... your mother will kill you!"

Lorraine snapped her head to the side and clicked her tongue. "No. She'll kill him." Ignoring the comment, a boy nodded grimly and glanced from Motormouth to Tracy, and then back again.

"I hear you. Besides, we already tried it, and it didn't work."

Penny pouted and moved back towards Seaweed, who automatically put an arm around her waist. Tracy, however, was still close to her breaking point. Giving up looked so easy and beneficial right about now.

"Anyway, this time it won't be like yesterday. Mrs. von Tussle said there'll be armed guards at the Studio!"

The gum-chewing redhead jumped suddenly from Seaweed, appeared beside Tracy, and stuck out her arms. "With aaarrrrmmss!" Everyone just sort of paused for a moment while Tracy pat her friend's arms down again.

"Someone could get shot."

Stooie huffed. "And for what? Just so we can dance on some silly show?" As the rest of the kids there were beginning to agree, Ms.

Motormouth shook her head and scoffed.

"Hold it! Nobody said this was gonna be easy! If something's worth having, it's worth fighting for." She turned her head to look at Tracy, who was flying lower than ever. "Tracy, why did you start all this in the first place?"

"Iâ€| just think it's stupid we can't all dance together."

"So you tried once, and you failed. We can't get lazy when things get crazy!" Motormouth Maybelle exclaimed zealously, her eyes set and serious as she gazed around at a room full of hopeful teens. Penny ended up locking eyes with Seaweed's mother momentarily as she made her rounds, and she nearly shuddered at the baring look of hope she saw in her eyes. She was so passionate in everything she did, but this--this was on a whole different level of importance. It was what was right, their rights. For once in her life, Penny felt that this was something that needed immediate attention. She wanted nothing more than to see blacks and whites together, forever integrated. Who cared how long it took, or what the prices of purchase were?

As Miss Maybelle began a very fiery and uplifting speech to everyone, Penny drew closer to Tracy. At the moment, Seaweed was over with his mother and Inez, acting as support while the DJ poured her heart and soul out to each and every boy and girl present. Tears had begun welling up in her eyes, and she gripped onto her children's hands with a force that Penny herself had never witnessed before.

She told of all the roads her and her ancestors had gone down to get even what little they had today, and of how great the riches of the future would be when at last they got what they had been pining for all this time: equality. It was a struggle not yet overcome, but she was standing before them today to say that if it was for what's right, then she would not stop fighting until the darkness had subsided.

Tracy and Link looked to one another, bewildered by the powerful words dripping from this highly regarded woman. Penny, as an instinct, went to Seaweed as she saw Ms. Motormouth Maybelle drawing to a close. It had become an all-out, inspirational sermon, complete with the others rising up with more, extremely vocal words of encouragement.

Seaweed stared down at Penny and gave her the most sentimental, empowering smile that she had ever seen on anyone. His eyes reflected the newfound assurance given to him by his mother, and it was quite the sight to see. Bursting into an eloquent smile of her own, she wrapped her arms around him, and he around her, in turn. Nodding one more time to his mom, who had spotted them both, he leaned down to Penny and whispered softly into her ear:

"We're gonna do this, baby." He held her closely as she rested her head on his chest. That's right. They were. And this time, they were going to succeed.

* * *

>After an informal, 'formal' meeting about tomorrow's Miss Hairspray plans, everything was set in stone. Each person knew their place, when to be there, and how to do their specified task. Even Penny was

certain that she was going to knock things out of the ballpark. Needless to say, a little reassuring gesture from Seaweed every now and again always kept her newly acquired confidence up and running. So, she was ready for anything. <p>Now all she needed was Miss Edna's expertise, a fresh, new bathrobe, those shoes hidden beneath a floorboard in the back of her closet, and a lot of hairspray--then she would _really_ be ready for tomorrow.

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* * *

>

Kelsey Rose: Have I mentioned how excited I am for You Can't Stop the Beat and afterwards lately? Well, I AM! I hope you guys are, too. Hehehâ€| ooooh, I'm gonna have some fun. Also, I've been thinkin' about this for months now, butâ€| is there any existing, intelligible couple name for Seaweed and Penny? Everything sounds so deranged to me. Seanny, Pennyweed, Penweedâ€| uh, yeah. Not a pretty picture. Haha, just wonderin'--toss some ideas out there! Love you guys. XOXO. R&R!

(By the way, I wonder who will catch my Hairspray movie reference in this chapter... hmmm.)

6. Never Goin' Back

Kelsey Rose: Thank goodness for having more than one computer in this house. For those of you who didn't know, my lovely computer crashed, and I lost everything on that hard drive. That's partly why this chapter took so freakin' long. :/ For that, I apologize. Anywho, I have this fancy laptop now. :) So, everything's coo'. Also, hello to the new readers! And thank you tons for the positive feedback!

Disclaimer: Yes, all right, we get it. I don't own Hairspray or anything. :(Boohoo.

* * *

><p>Chapter Six:

Never Goin' Back

There was a pleasant breeze outside on this particular day, and, sadly, for Penny, it wasn't at all because of the weather. Amongst the shadows of the WZZT television station, her and a horde of other teenagers, all of color, had been waiting for a specific signal.

Gripping a house robe tighter around herself, Penny shivered. In reality, it wasn't very chilly at all, given that it was essentially summer conditions, but then again, here was a girl who had probably never shown any leg in her life. Her upper body was scorching beneath the warmth of her 'disguise,' while her face was mildly obstructed by rarely-seen glasses upon the bridge of her nose. Of course, no description would be complete without her unbelievable new hair. It was wildly curled and sprayed into an array that could only be

described as the picturesque look for this new and hot, teenage tigress.

Penny mainly stayed with the girls of the group, Lorraine and Rhonda, to be exact. They would smirk to her and whisper at how people were going to flip when she showed the world the 'new her,' but Penny was still feigning the majority of her new confidence.

"Girl, you just wait. Crazy mama or not, you're gonna have the fellas goin' outta their minds," Lorraine gently jabbed the redhead in her arm, and Penny forced a grin. She wanted to ask, 'You really think so?' but her nerves got the better of her. Rhonda and Lorraine were already back to their uncontrollable excitement a few seconds later, anyhow, thus leaving little point to the notion.

* * *

>Inside the studio, everything was in similar, though more widely spread hysteria. Guards were rushing this way and that off-screen, cans of hairspray were being readied for the girls and Corny for the next commercial break, and cameramen and stage hands were squawking out silent directions like crazy. Mrs. von Tussle was making certain that *everything* for her Amber's big day was in order. There would be no interruptions from that fat, no-talent Turnblad girl today; not on her watch.

"And we're off for a network commercial!"

Just after the girls and Corny had finished a lovely performance of an ode to Ultra Clutch, a man in a hat, with a fake nose, began wheeling in a ridiculously huge can of hairspray, straight to the center of the stage. Velma eyed him warily as she chucked her clipboard aside and wandered over, on instant alert.

"What the hell is this?" She demanded. The man immediately began to fidget in his shoes.

"Product placement. The sponsor insists," He supplied promptly, his masked expression showing no signs of change. For once, Velma actually looked thoughtful as she glanced over the prop. A curt nod of approval voiced what had suddenly struck her.

"What a relief. We needed something there," Without giving the 'stranger' any further regard, she turned on her heels and began a fast-paced walk over to her clipboard once more. However, after only a couple of seconds, an idea beckoned for her to turn around yet again. "Don't Iâ€ know you?" She asked of the man, and then he knew the jig was up, particularly when she walked back over.

"Honest, Velma, I'm a total stranger." It was worth insisting, at least. Lowering her eyebrows, she swiftly ripped the hat and fake nose from him, only to gasp in pulsing anger and revulsion.

"_You_!"

Wilbur Turnblad put on his acting face and gave the impression of being completely and utterly foiled. "Damn!"

"Guards!" The blonde screeched. "Riot Squad! Come hereâ€"

pronto!"

At that moment, four overly dressed guards came running up, in full attire: hats, long-sleeved shirts and pants, helmets, and all. Velma continued after Wilbur had been taken a hold of by one of the guards.

"What is this? Some kind of Trojan Horse?" She inquired, walking around the can, studying it suspiciously. "What's inside?" When he refused to answer, she virtually spit poison at the man. "Well, if your daughter's hiding in there, she'll _rot_ in there!" She paused and turned to the gathered police, "Guards, if anybody touches that canâ€¦ open fire!"

One of the larger guards nodded and then spoke, with a voice of a questionable tone. "Understood, ma'am."

"You win, von Tussle, _this time_. You're one clever womanâ€¦ I'll say that," Wilbur's acting skills, or lack thereof, were amazingly overlooked by a peeved Velma von Tussle.

"Get out!"

The guards carried him off, only to carefully set him down a little ways out the main studio and down the hall. "Thanks, gang," He grinned that goofy grin of his and gave them the salute.

"No problem, Mista' T," The larger _guard_ replied, motioning to the rest of her group. "Let's get this show on the road, kids." With a short and quiet shout of approval from each of them, they all rushed off in separate directions, each with their own place to be and job to carry out.

* * *

>The team of kids, along with Penny, had long since crept their way into the heart of the station. Surprised that they hadn't been pinpointed yet, their worry only increased as they realized how loud each of their heartbeats actually were. <p>Even more of a bundle of nerves was Miss Penny Pingleton, for she was the lead of this gaggle of eager teens. Inez stayed close behind her, along with a few other people that she had befriended. Amber von Tussle's voice could be heard throughout the whole place as she sang a very spiteful song that she had 'dedicated' to Tracy about her having cooties or something.<p>

Whatever. She was about to get the show of her lifetime, anyway.

As her song began to end, however, Penny began to let all of her worries claw at her in full force. Tracy was in place, right? Could she (_meaning herself_) really handle this? There wasâ€¦ no way that she could--could she? She bit her lip, and then felt a hand grasp onto hers. Startled, she looked down and saw L'il Inez's shining face staring on at the scene from the cracked door that they all hid behind. A smile soon graced Penny's lips as well.

Forget Amber; forget Prudy; forget _everyone._ Tracy, Seaweed, Ms. Maybelle, and all of her friends were here. She was ready to show them what she had to bring to the table.

They knew nothing at all when it came to what Seaweed had taught her, and it was about time to show 'em.

* * *

>Amber did her plastic little bow and then waved to the general public. <p>"Thank you ladies and gentlemen, and kids! I'm now ready to consume the title of Miss Teenage Hairspray." She said firmly, and with the fakest smile on her face. Corny scowled inwardly as Mr. Spritzer appeared with the crown and a bouquet of flowers.

"I think you mean _assume_," He countered her, even if she didn't pay any mind to it whatsoever. "Andâ€| just to be sure, I think we'd better check the board." All eyes fell on the scoreboard, which showed that Amber von Tussle was the winner by very few votes. As it appeared like Corny was about to object, Mr. Spritzer popped into the picture with a loud:

"Yes, Amber von Tussle is the winner!" The blonde reacted with a pleased, evil, and girly giggle.

"What did I tell you? Give me the crown, give me the flowers, and everybody start bowing!" Amber ordered, as she snatched the bouquet of flowers and had the crown placed on her head by one of the Council girls. It was then that Tracy burst in through the doors, the newly revealed 'guards' charging in behind her. Seaweed and the other boys from Maybelle's were, in fact, them, and they were all dressed to kill now as Tracy marched right up to her enemy.

"Not so fast, Amber. Look who's comin' through the front door!" Looks of shock and horror were on Amber and Velma's faces as they saw what was happening, but not one person could do anything while they were still on air. Corny, on the flipside, couldn't have smiled more as he saw the talented teen arrive.

"Right on schedule! I meanâ€|" He straightened his collar stylishly. "I know nothing about this complex plan." He winked to Velma, who was standing in a clear hussy off to the side, and then faced the cameras. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the never to be counted out, Tracy Turnblad!"

Tracy began her own song, dancing and singing her heart out. A little ways into the verse, she was joined by Link, and Penny could safely say that, even though her own vision was a bit hindered, her friend had never looked happier.

Nevertheless, reality began to be apparent when the two performers turned to one another, looking into the other's eyes while the audience raved and called out various cheers for them. Penny knew that this was her cue to go, and with a last bit of nerves shoved off of her plate, she started a dead sprint down to the stage, all the others behind her, to Tracy, Link, and the rest of them.

A few eyebrows definitely rose when the girl clad in a house robe and crazy glasses, with wild hair appeared, but no one could've been prepared for what was going on under all of that.

Tracy, with her arms still around Link, looked to her best friend. "What do ya' have to say, Penny?"

The redhead stepped forward and smirked, soon shucking off her house coat and glasses to reveal an extremely short and relatively revealing, stylish, sequined, purple dress that complimented her white heels perfectly. Mama's little girl was a little girl no longer.

She glanced quickly back towards Seaweed as she heard a few hollers from others around her.

"I am now a checkerboard chick!" More people clapped and cheered, while she let her true colors show as she belted her verse of the song.

"You can't stop a river
> As it rushes to the sea
 You can try to stop the hands of time,

> But you know it just won't be," Penny gravitated over to Seaweed, a heated grin forming on her lips.<p>

"And if they try to stop us, Seaweed,
> I'll call the N - double-A - C - P!" Blowing a kiss to her, Seaweed joined his girl in song and dance, even if Penny hadn't quite gotten up to nerve to all-out dance just yet.<p>

"'Cause the world keeps spinnin'
> 'Round and 'round."<p>

"'Round and round!"

"And my heart's keepin' time to the speed of sound!"

"Speed of sound!"

"I was lost till I heard the drums, and I found my way," Just then, as Penny finished up that line, Tracy and Link joined the pair to wrap their part up as a team. It was then that all of Seaweed's secret dance lessons really shined through. Some of the moves were awkward, but Penny could reckon with the best of them out there today. Thanks to him, she was showing up, transformed, with a serious bang_.

The von Tussles were forced over to the side as more and more dancers, black and white, mixed together, longing to join the historical moment. Amber was whining and hiding beneath her chair while her mother looked on in shock and resentment, mainly because she was entirely powerless now.

Once that verse was through, people embraced for a moment as Tracy turned her attention to Amber. Penny couldn't help but smile, especially at the feeling of Seaweed's hands resting just above her hips.

"Amber, this is my danceâ€¦ and it's dedicated to everybody!" No one needed to tell these kids twice. The dancing came in powerfully, and every last person moved in sync with each other. Even Penny, who was less than a pro, strutted her stuff, with the help of flirtatious looks from Seaweed every now and then.

Tracy's dance continued, but when Corny leapt to his feet at the

sight of the smoking scoreboard, everyone clearly heard the news:
"Everyone! Look! Look at the scoreboard!"

Tracy had won, and by an amazing amount, at that.

Penny squealed and wrapped her arms around Seaweed, who, in turn, did the same with her (minus the girly squealing, naturally). "Go Tracy!" She called proudly, as she beamed from where she stood.

Velma and Amber von Tussle both shrieked. "No!" Amber then pouted childishly.

"It's wrong! It's just so wrong!" L'il Inez accordingly wandered over to the younger blonde and held out her hand.

"Hand over that crown, honey."

"You'll have to rip it from my cold, dead hands!" Amber snapped, edging back. Inez canted her head and gave her a daring look.

"That can be arranged!" Before Inez actually got her hands on Amber, two people held her back, knowing good and well just how easily she could've won that fight, despite her size.

"You can keep your crown, Amber," Tracy went on to say. "I have my heart set on something a lot more important." Link smiled widely from beside her.

"Would that happen to be me?"

Tracy chuckled once and countered with her own smile.

"Of course you, Link," He then gave her a small kiss on her forehead. "But, I also want a graduate degree in musicology, with a minor in Ethnic studies, andâ€¦" She paused. "I also want to be the first one to say that: 'The Corny Collins Show is now and forevermore officially integrated!'" A massive applause filled the room, from both the live audience and the kids on stage. People congratulated one another, distributed high-fives, embraced, or just smiled on.

Penny couldn't help but jump for joy. Seaweed and the others could finally dance with the rest of the Council. She couldn't be happier for them. Tilting her gaze up towards him, the large smile only grew.

"You did it!" She whispered elatedly to Seaweed, only to have him shake his head and give her a tender squeeze around her shoulders.

"We did it, baby girl," He corrected her, with the utmost affection.

Everyone had a moment to themselves while Mr. Spritzer chatted with Mrs. Von Tussle about her 'new job.' The only real part that everyone got was that she would be the "Vice President of Ultra Clutch, beauty products for women of color." The majority laughed or snickered to one another. Velma, however, was utterly stupefied and secretly enraged at the idea.

The next event was Mr. Spritzer announcing that he could very well award Link with a record deal. When Tracy's new boyfriend exploded with it finally being his "big break," Penny knew that things couldn't get any better.

Not surprisingly, her having thought that, meant that they were a hair from getting worse as a bad alternative.

Prudy was shoving her way through the audience, frantic and all in a rush about getting to the stage. When Penny saw her, she had to keep herself from gasping in surprise. Instead, she coughed and looked this way and that, trying to pretend like she hadn't just seen that crazed lady rushing down to her.

"Excuse me, pardooooonnn meee! Pardon me! Oh, _sir_!"

Seaweed saw Prudy and looked to Penny, visibly disturbed.

"Give me back my daughter!" She yelled, causing everyone to stare, bewildered. "I know you've got her!" Mrs. Pingleton pointed a single finger in accusation towards no one in particular. "I saw her on TV!" That was when she turned around and spotted her little girl, all dolled up into someone she had never seen before.

"_Penny_!" She screeched again, moving closer to her daughter, disregarding Seaweed. "Iâ€¦ I can hardly recognize youâ€¦" Prudy trailed off, eyeing Penny with unabashed amazement. Penny bit down hard on her lower lip.

"I'm a pretty girl, Mama!" The teenager stepped closer to Seaweed, and stiffly noted how her mother had winced. Penny didn't care; she _couldn't_ _care_. Seaweed and her were together whether or mother liked it or not.

Prudy _was_ set aflame by the concept, however. She didn't want her daughter with someâ€¦ some _lowlife_. _She stared long and hard at the pair, and not a word was uttered by anyone in the studio for those precious, few seconds. Mrs. Pingleton was not an unintelligent woman. She knew exactly what was at stake. So, maintaining a stiff upper lip, she drew in a sharp, much-needed breath and looked at her rebellious child straight in the face.

_My, she'sâ€¦ glowing, _ the woman almost drew back. _No! This is a _sin_, a complete abomination! _She reminded herself harshly, and yet her words still doubly betrayed her.

"You look so happyâ€¦" Penny's mother glanced around solemnly for a moment, and unbeknownst to Penny, took notice of the cameras and large sum of other people littered around for a second or third time. "I can't say it's what I want," Penny swallowed hard, scared that her knees would buckle. _She can't, _she told herself, beginning to feel the start of her heart breaking. "â€¦_but_ if this black boy is responsible for the light in your eyesâ€¦ then, how could I object?"

What? Penny stared open-mouthed.

"Oh, Mama!" She broke into an overjoyed smile, and, on an impulse, embraced the woman that had caused her so much emotional, social, and mental grief over the years. Hearing her say those words somehow put

a spell on Penny, one that refused reality and offered her a chance at absolute tranquility with the boy she was so quickly falling for. She hadn't even stopped to question her mother's sincerity. She hadn't wanted to. Penny wanted so desperately to take the blessing as the truth. That, in a nutshell, was all she truly wanted, with all her heart. She needed that acceptance.

When at last she had released her mother, she went back over to Seaweed, tears creeping up in the corners of her eyes. He smiled and purposefully avoided any eye contact with Prudy, who had given him a fearful once-over. He didn't want to look into her eyes. Unlike Penny, he all but believed her. But, right now, none of that mattered.

Conversations flew left and right. Then, as Link and Tracy finally kissed, the big question of who or what was in the giant hairspray can was proposed by Velma.

It was also then that, right on cue, Mrs. Edna Turnblad made her grand appearance in her stunning, self-made gown. Penny found herself flushing with delight, especially when Tracy's mom began anthem that virtually anyone and everyone could (or should) relate to.

Others joined, and it was a clear, huge smash, but the grand finale of fun came when Motormouth Maybelle arrived on the scene. Awarded with wild catcalls and applause, the woman stripped away her police uniform to reveal a gorgeous attire of her own. Tracy, Penny, Link, Seaweed and the others had already stepped into the fray with voices raised and feet working nonstop. There was but one thing left to doâ€¦

"C'mon, you von Tussles. Go on, shake your fanny muscles!"

"We can't!"

"Yes, you can!"

"No, we can't!"

"Yes, you can!"

"â€¦ yes, we can!"

When Velma and Amber von Tussle finally cast all differences aside and leapt into the madness, that was when Penny knew things were really accomplished. Even if this was the last time she would dance in the same place (or even dance at all) with some plastic like Amber von Tussle, she knew that for this moment, there was perfect harmony and unity between those of color and those not. It felt so right to her, and so natural. For now, things were as they should be.

* * *

>The performance ended with an extra 'umphf' of energy, brought on by the amazing Ms. Maybelle and the sheer joy felt by the boys and girls all around. After everything was over, Penny couldn't wait to speak with Tracy, and with just everyone else. She was dying to get to her best friend, even though she was currently surrounded by well-wishers, fans new and old, Link, and other Council members.
<p>"Trrrraaaaaacccy!" Penny called over to her, clumsily hobbling over

to her friend in those pesky heels. Somewhere between her happy mood and excitement, she had misplaced her coordination.

"Tracy!"<p>

"Penny!" They hugged one another and giggled, much like they always did.

"Oh, you were wonderful, Tracy!" Penny exclaimed, her eyes bright and wide with enthusiasm for her best friend.

"Thanks," She chuckled humbly, and then smirked. "Talk about a look you've got going on there." Penny blushed. "I bet your mom's gonna have a _cow_!"

"My mama's already here, Trace," Penny laughed, trying to cover up the fact that what her friend had said had hit somewhat of a sensitive spot.

"Really?"

"Yeah. You mean you didn't see?" The redhead eyed her strangely. "She'sâ€| " She glanced around, studying every nook and crevice of the main studio. Her shoulders inevitably fell. "â€|not here." Tracy examined her friend uncertainly and with a hint of worry, but then chose a smile over anything else.

"She probably just stepped out. Don't worry about it," _You probably don't want her here after what happened, anywayâ€| _Tracy wanted to cringe, but she kept herself from it when she saw a familiar face walking over. "You've got somebody here to see you, anyhow." She smiled knowingly to Penny, and then left her. Penny frowned, having not fully understood.

"What'd she mean by-" Sudden arms around her waist had knocked the words right out of the way without any trouble at all. Gasping silently, she felt herself being wrapped in a loving and secure embrace. Just by the warmth in the touch and the mere scent of the person, she knew exactly who it was.

"Hey, baby," He spoke softly into her ear, sending a collection of chills up and down her spine. She had to catch her breath again before she could even think to reply.

"Hey, Seaweed," She breathed out as she spoke, and it didn't take a rocket scientist for him to guess that his tactic had worked in full. He smiled, and she tilted her head up a little and locked eyes with him.

"You certainly know how to keep a guy on his toes, babe," He stated, and then chuckled, grasping onto her hands as he kept his arms snaked around her waist. Penny blinked her eyes several times.

"What?"

With much difficulty, he let himself release her and turn her around to face him, all so he could insinuate her present get-up.

"So, _this_ was the girl at the gum machine, huh?" She bit her tongue this time, knowing by the hot sensation on her face just what she

must look like. What if he didn't like this new look? This had partly been _for him_, after all. Her mind whirled, but only until he took her hands in his. "No matter what you dress this girl up in," He squeezed her hands. "She's always beautiful to me."

Penny displayed several emotions in just under five seconds. Her smile, to him, was a response enough. To see that look of pure happiness light up in her eyes was all to him and more.

"Don't get me wrong, now," He started to say again, causing Penny to stare up at him oddly. "This isâ€¦" He gave her 'new look' a mild, but playful double take. "This is _really_ nice, too." That was about as respectful as he could put it to her. If he was being totally straightforward, Seaweed had a lot more to say about how incredible she looked right now.

She always did look absolutely stunning, though. But, something about how she looked now reminded him of just how attracted he was to her. Today she displayed a confidence that he hadn't recalled from before. She seemed entirely self-assured with who she was, what she stood for, and what she had to offer to the world, and _that _took her awe-inspiring beauty from before and multiplied it by millions.

"Seaweed," She grinned and teasingly slipped her hands out of his, much to his surprise. Penny then rested her hand behind his neck gently, her fingers softly brushing against his skin.

"Hmm?"

"Iâ€¦ just wanted to tell you something," She began to say, unsure of how to continue. He glanced down at her with a warm look in his eyes.

"What's on your mind, sweet girl?" His arms wrapped around her waist once more. Penny never once looked away from him, which caused the deception of how nervous she actually was.

"Just, Iâ€¦" She searched distraughtly for her words, knowing that now was the worst time to stumble. Summoning up an enormous amount of courage, she swallowed and tried to pick up where she left off. "I just wanted to say that, I loâ€¦"

"Hey, Seaweed! Penny!" Tracy's voice caused Penny to flinch, but Seaweed simply looked over towards where Tracy and Link were running towards them, hand-in-hand. "Are we leaving for Motormouth's party yet, or what?" The teenager asked cheerfully. She had no clue what she had interrupted, or even that she had interrupted anything at all.

"Yeah, Trace," Seaweed laughed and removed his hands from Penny's waist again. Immediately after doing so, however, he used one hand to take hold of one of hers. "We're comin'." Tracy smiled, very satisfied.

"Link and I'll wait for you guys at the door." She decided, smiling to Link and then to Seaweed and Penny, before her and her own Prince Charming began to walk over to the door, whispering who-knows-what to each other the whole way. Seaweed stifled another laugh and then turned his attention back to Penny, who seemed to be waging war

something fierce in that head of hers.

"You were sayin'?" He said kindly, his expression at ease and content. Penny blinked back into the moment.

"Oh, I, uhâ€¦" She laughed a bit uneasily. "Never mind. Iâ€¦ forgot." She made a silly face of sorts and then gently pretended to knock herself on the head with one of her fists. "It wasn't anything big." Penny forced herself to tell him that, as much as it pained her to. Seaweed nodded and smiled, releasing her hand, so that he could put an arm around her shoulders.

"All right, baby. If you say so," He didn't think too much about it right now. Seaweed knew that if something was bugging her, she would come out and say it eventually. So, he wasn't too concerned. "Ready to go?" Penny nodded once.

The couple walked over to meet up with Link and Tracy, sharing only a few smiles and laughs before they exited and began to make their way to Motormouth Maybelle's record shop. All of them had anticipated a time that they would never forget, similar to today's accomplishments. Though, it was all of them except one, and it was someone with but a small pinch of anxiety tossed into the mix.

Penny had wanted to tell him and had regrettably missed her chance. Now she was pitted with the burden of words left unsaid, words that she wasn't even sure were plausible, even if her gut feeling told her otherwise.

This was love, wasn't it? Oh, god, for the sake of her sanity, it had to be. The sparks she felt, the butterflies in her stomach, the warmth in his touch, the way one look could hitch her breath in her throat or drive her absolutely crazy, the tangible emotions of all sorts that she felt inside and that she thought she saw reflected in his eyes, and just every aspect about their budding relationshipâ€¦ But, she was so uncertain. There were so many odds against it.

And yet, at the same time, it only took one smile from him to remind her what she already knew was the truth.

* * *

><p>Kelsey Rose: Can you say? GOODBYE, SCRIPT! Whooooooo, man. I sure can. From here on out, no more script. That makes life tooons easier for me. Anyway, enjoy. :D

7. A Light in the Darkness

****Kelsey Rose****: I think I need some wicked, awesome theme music. :) Having muse is wondrous! I should probably consider bottling it up and saving some for later. Again, thanks to all the sweet reviewers. You guys keep me inspired and on my toes!

****Disclaimer****: Hey, guess what? Hairspray isn't mine. Imagine that.

* * *

><p>Chapter Seven:

A Light in the Darkness

The party at Ms. Maybelle's had been amazing, in a word. The room had been overflowing with energy and pent up tension of all kinds. Above all else, though, was how much of a time that Penny had with absolutely no strings attached. She felt so liberated and unafraid to be herself. People of all colors were here to celebrate, and it was definitely something to see. Even some of the original Council members had shown up. Be that as it may, only Brenda could really be identified in the corner playing tonsil hockey with one of Seaweed's friends, but that didn't matter. Penny was hardly paying anyone, aside from Seaweed, any attention whatsoever.

They had danced the night away, much more intimately and closely than Penny had ever done with anyone else before. Though, to be fair, before he came along, she hadn't really done much dancing at all, of any kind.

The night was slowly drawing to a close, all the same, as disappointed as that made the partygoers. Penny knew exactly what that meant for her. It also sorely reminded her of what she had yet to accomplish. So, seeing how quickly people were beginning to file out and make plans to leave, she instinctively tightened her affectionate grip around Seaweed's neck. They had just been swaying slowly together to the ever-changing beat of the music, hardly a centimeter of space left between them.

Taking note to her abrupt discomfort, Seaweed gently kneaded at her lower back with a few of his fingers, hoping to soothe her. Penny closed her eyes for a moment and laid her head against his shoulder. If she could just stay like this for the rest of tonight, she knew that everything would be all right. She knew that she wouldn't have to go home to face her mother alone, who still left her strangely uncertain, irrespective of her 'positive' showing earlier that day. But, she could only run away from the inevitable for so long, and she knew that all too well.

"Baby girl," Seaweed spoke so suddenly that Penny jarred her eyes open, her heart beginning to race slightly. "It's gettin' late." He said regrettably, hardly wanting to let her go himself. It would have been the furthest thing from his mind, in fact, if not for the recurring visions of her angry mother.

"I know," She responded softly, her hands sliding over to his shoulders, perching there for the time being.

"I don't want you in trouble with your mama," A tender smile shone on his face as he leaned down to place a single kiss on her forehead. Penny giggled once and grabbed a hold of one of his hands.

"You want to get rid of me already, huh?" She asked, a mischievous undertone in her voice, whilst her fingers toyed around with his. She proudly observed his wide-eyed reaction in all its glory.

"Now, you know that's notâ€¦" She cleverly silenced him with a kiss, a fierce and passionate one that she placed directly on his lips. Scarcely being one to complain, Seaweed melted into it within a matter of milliseconds. While they had never kissed one another with such 'enthusiasm' before, it was amazing just how they moved with one

another like perfect clockwork. His lips were incredibly soft and were a giant leap from the gum that she chewed so religiously. She could practically feel herself falling faster and faster, picking up velocity as she lost herself completely in the moment. Neither one housed any scrap of desire to pull away, for fear of eagerly craving more as soon as they parted.

Just the same, and like all wonderful things, it did have to draw to an end, an agonizingly slow end. Seaweed had drawn back from her, leaving their lips just barely apart. Both were set up to silently stare at one another, their breathing erratic after such an intense kiss. Penny's mind had gone totally blank. Why her legs were still holding her up, she had no idea.

"I think you owe me a walk, my princess," Seaweed reminded her quietly, before taking her hands. Penny, after forcing herself to lose that deer-in-the-headlights look of amazement, beamed.

"Yeah?" She pretended to weigh the options in her head. "I guess so," She admitted, her face brilliantly lit in the dimmed lights of the record shop. "Just let me say goodbye to Tracy and the others." When he nodded and reluctantly let go of her hands, she went over to her best friend in very good spirits, despite walking over to a very personal confrontation between her and Link.

Penny coughed forcefully and rocked a couple of times on her feet. Tracy instantly put a stop to the lip lock with Link and turned to her friend, blushing, but cheerful all the same.

"G'night, Tracy!" She smiled to her friend, and then glanced to the brunette's staggered boyfriend. "And Link!" The couple waved to the redhead in their own typical ways and muttered a heartfelt, but distracted goodbye to her. "See you guys at school!" Satisfied, Penny wheeled around and went back to Seaweed, who was waiting with a coat for her, just in case it was a little chilly outside.

"Think Ms. Maybelle and Inez are still awake?" She wondered, her eyes hopeful. Seaweed rubbed her on the back lovingly.

"Probably not. They usually turn in pretty early," He confessed, just as Penny frowned. "I'll be sure to give 'em the message, though, baby doll. Don't worry." So it wasn't the same as telling them in person, but Penny was more than happy with his gesture.

"Let's get goin', then," Seaweed draped his jacket around her shoulders and then winded his arm around her waist. The pair waved a few more goodbyes to the remaining cluster of people and then leisurely made their exit. Any time that they could kill to be together was definitely worth it.

* * *

>They had chosen to walk the entire distance to Penny's home, which wasn't very far at all. Amid the whispering and extremely flirtatious moves flying between the happy couple, Penny had forgotten all about her qualms of returning home. Anything negative had fled her mind one hundred percent. <p>It wasn't until they came upon the darkened form of her house that she felt the sensation of a knife driving and twisting into her stomach. Reality had come crashing down on her out of nowhere, and she was lucky to still have Seaweed's arm securely

around her, or she could have very well fallen. The light in one of the front windows told everything to Penny, and only frightened her further.<p>

Seaweed stopped shy of the walkway to her front door and turned to face her. Penny was so close to begging him to take her back that it was almost overwhelming. She couldn't even figure out why she was so distressed. This was just her mother; she had said it was all right. Why couldn't Penny just accept that as the truth and move on?

Because she knew her mother better than that.

"I'll see you at school," He placed a soft kiss on her lips, barely even a peck. Penny urged herself to smile.

"Goodnight," She slipped her arms around him for a few seconds, savoring the moment for as long as she was able.

"'Night," He smirked and quickly kissed the top of her head. With a solitary wink to her, he squeezed her hands and then began the familiar walk back to his place, leaving Penny to take the longest walk of all back up to her house.

* * *

>A minute or so of hesitation was all it called for before Penny took the plunge and trudged, with heavy feet, up to her front steps, Seaweed's jacket still wrapped comfortably around her shoulders. Taking a deep breath, she jiggled the doorknob, preparing to lean down to pick up the spare key from beneath her doormat. Much to her astonishment, the door was already unlocked, and thus creaked open when prompted to do so. <p>Slipping inside, she quietly shut the door behind her, breathing in and out once before she ambled towards the den area.<p>

"Mom, I'mâ€| She looked around, excruciatingly aware of her mother sitting on the couch, reading. "I'm home." It didn't take many words to guess Prudy's state of mind when she snapped her book shut and stared vacantly over at her daughter.

"Mamaâ€| are you okay?" Penny asked, honestly worried as she took a couple of steps towards her. The silence was tearing her apart, but she couldn't possibly show it. Even still, all Prudy did was purse her lips, crease her eyebrows, and stare at nothing in particular someplace in the room. It drove Penny up the wall. "Say _something_." She gently pleaded with her, almost in a whine, her hands rushing to cling to one another in a nervous train wreck of anxiety.

"How _could_ you?" Prudy hissed, her lips hardly opening to let her speak.

"Wha-" Penny was cut off by her mother rising up and moving to stare her straight in the face, her eyes burning holes into the absolute core of her soul. Prudy sharply took hold of her child's arms, her voice rising considerably.

"How _could_ you_, Penny?" The younger girl was at a loss of words to say. How could she answer when there was nothing that would appease her mother? She had done nothing wrong, therefore making this fully

unnecessary. "Answer me!" Mrs. Pingleton jolted Penny back into the real world with a single, brisk shake.

"What are you talking about?" She inquired frantically, fear rising in the depths of her paling eyes.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, young lady!" Prudy hollered, releasing Penny's arms with a harsh shove.

"I really don-" Finishing that line would've been worthless, but coupled with the unexpected, agonizing sensation of her mother directly and harshly backhanding her, she had the breath and words knocked right out of her, anyway.

"I can't believe you! To think, a daughter of mine would sink so low as to associate with such trash, much less _date_ them. You should be disgusted, _absolutely_ disgusted, Penny Lou Pingleton."

Penny could have choked on the knot that was lodged in her throat. If the throbbing pain in her cheek wasn't enough to make her want to cry, then hearing all of this blabbering nonsense from her mother was plenty of a reason. It hadn't mattered, though, because new, warm tears had suddenly just begun to pour down her flushed cheeks.

"I will not have _my daughter_ participating in such sinful activities. Do you hear me? What you're doing is an abomination! It just isn't right!" Prudy raved on, full speed, her voice frayed and fraught. But, it wasn't long before something in Penny snapped.

"You don't understand!" She choked out, through her sobbing.

"Oh, and what don't I understand about you giving yourself away to some revolting, little Negro boy?" Prudy barked back, which caused Penny to firmly stomp her foot on the ground. Her mother really didn't understand her at all.

"Don't call him that!" She spat, backing away from her. At this moment, she wanted nothing more to do with her mother.

"Well, that's what they are, young lady. Disgusting, filthy Negroes, out to take over our government right from underneath us white folks' noses."

Penny continued to sob, her chest heaving as she fought to breathe and to try and stay calm.

"You're wrong!"

"Am I!"

The redheaded teenager shook her head, her face contorting while the tears persistently fell. She couldn't contain herself, and in a whirlpool of an unstable, emotional rollercoaster, she set her heart on the chopping block.

"I _love him_, mother!"

The room fell eerily silent. Aside from Penny's weeping, there wasn't a sound to relieve them of the intensity of what had just occurred. Prudy looked horrorstricken from where she stood, her mouth propped

open in pure shock and disbelief of what she had just heard from her only child, her little girl. She couldn't believe that this was happening, after all of the perfect plans _she_ had made for her daughter.

Revelation of what she had said had only come to Penny at that particular moment, and she only tightened her balled fists even more. She only had to privately repeat to herself that she had done nothing wrong to feel additionally justified. It took nothing more than that.

"_Get out_," Her mother virtually growled her demand. She could not be around her daughter right now. Disappointment was a massive understatement for what she was feeling. No words would even come close to accurately describing it.

Frightened and overtaken with grief and frustration, Penny took one last look at her seething mother and rushed out the door without even bothering to slam it shut behind her. That woman didn't have to tell her twice.

How could her mother do this to her after supposedly giving Penny her blessing? It was like ripping the carpet out from under her feet and stabbing her in the back, yet again -- for what, the ten thousandth time? She couldn't believe her. She just really couldn't. This was the lowest of the low out of all the things that Prudy had done since her father had been knocked out of the picture. It just wasn't fair. She had to get away, for however long she could manage.

The light shower of rain that began to coat the moonlit sidewalk was all but refreshing. Though it washed away most of her tears, she knew that she must look a sight with running mascara and a horrible flush to her cheeks, one side more bright than the other from where she had been struck. And yet, she didn't care. All that mattered to her was that she got to where she so desperately wanted to be. Her mind told her to go to the Turnblad residence to be with Tracy, but her heart was elsewhere.

As a result, she made a hasty sprint down the sidewalk, retracing her steps from earlier. There was no one else that she wanted to be with right now, and she only hoped to be understood.

* * *

>Cowering beneath the warmth of the jacket she thought so fondly of, Penny found herself at a doorstep, soaked to the core from the rain and a few fresh tears, but there nevertheless. Treating it as though it may just snap at her, she lifted her hand timidly towards the door, a couple of meager knocks ending up being all that she could handle. Lucky for her, though, the distant sound of footsteps could be heard within about fifteen seconds. <p>A disgruntled groan could also be heard, just before the door was opened. Alarm drifted from both sides instantaneously. "Penny?"<p>

Seaweed looked utterly stunned to see her standing there, not only because she was actually there, but mainly because of her current condition. "Penny, it's fifteen after midnightâ€| what happened to y-"

"Oh, Seaweed!" She leapt at him without any inhibitions, instantly

twining her arms around his neck. The tears began flowing more rapidly than before as she buried her face into his neck, her cries muffled as she held on to him. He immediately locked her in a sturdy, comforting embrace, his heart twisting at the desperate sight of how shaken she was. In an attempt to calm her, he tenderly rubbed his hands up and down her back.

When sobs became more and more controllable and her breathing was on its way to being normal once again, Seaweed shut the door and lead her over the couch, where he sat her down and leaned her into him.

"Penny, babyâ€¦ what happened?" He kept his voice at a whisper as he gently stroked her hair, hoping that they hadn't stirred his mother or Inez. This issue only required a stabilized party of two.

"My motherâ€¦ sheâ€¦ s-she," Penny tried, but breathing came as more of a priority at the present time. Seaweed's expression darkened almost straight away. Somehow he thought he saw this coming. With a general idea of what that pitiful woman put her through, he knew that he didn't need to upset her any more with twenty-one questions about what went on.

"Shhh," He took one of her hands and massaged it in his. "We can talk about it in the morning, sweet girl." Seaweed ran his hand, from the arm that had rested around her shoulders, against the length of her own arm. "You're stayin' here tonight." Penny hiccupped once and nuzzled her head into him, her eyes red and puffy from crying. She was so thankful for him right now, even though she always had been.

"Thank you _so much_, Seaweed," She whispered coarsely. "I'm sorry to be any troubleâ€¦" He placed his right index finger over her lips.

"Nuh uh, little girl," He said lightheartedly, pulling her up from the couch. "None of that." The teenaged boy brought her hands up to his lips and kissed them softly, just as he began leading her off to his room.

Once they arrived, she smiled up at him awkwardly and looked over towards where she would be sleeping. Besides the fact that she couldn't believe she was in such aâ€¦ _sanctuary_, she felt a little off about taking his bed from him. He chuckled and easily scooped her up in his arms, drawing a quiet, startled squeak from her.

Very gently and tenderly, he laid her down, only to have her prop herself up with her arms afterwards. He was not about to have a girl he cared about so much sleeping on some place like the couch or, god forbid, the floor. He would much rather take that for himself.

"There ya' go," He tickled her once beneath her chin while she proceeded to glare playfully up at him.

"But where are you gonna sleep?" She questioned, with a small hint of worry, as her right hand very cautiously rose up to brush softly against her injured, slightly swollen cheek. Seaweed sat down with her.

"The couch, or somethin'," He replied indifferently, one of his hands

moving to rest on her knee. Penny began to chew thoughtfully on the inside of her lip. She figured that she may as well just take another leap into the darkness here.

"Would youâ€¦ stay here, with me?" Sensing that another blush was bound to tiptoe its way onto her cheeks, she skillfully trailed her eyes from her feet back up to his face, which held a relatively masked look of pleasant surprise.

"Well, I mean," He eyed her, intrigued. "If that's what you want, baby." Penny had to keep herself from squealing. It worked? Either she was more convincing than she thought, or she had just picked up on a lucky streak.

"Really?" She piped up, her eyes rounding with delight and relief as she searched his face.

"Of course," Seaweed whispered sincerely while maneuvering around her legs to take his place beside her. The couple laid down together with his arms warmly around her waist, and her nestled up close to him. He always seemed to bring her indescribable amounts of consolation in the strangest of ways, but now she was just glad to have that same, secure feeling from him that she so feverishly adored.

"Goodnight, Seaweed," She mumbled, effortlessly beginning to give in to sleep. He smiled to himself and placed his chin comfortably upon her shoulder.

"Sweet dreams, my angel."

* * *

><p>Kelsey Rose: Talk about a fun scene for the morning, huh? ;)

8. I Found My Way

****Kelsey Rose****: Whoo, boy. Your girl here just started classes again this Thursday. She's tired and has succumbed to writing her Author's Notes in third person for today. Don't worry, though! More schoolwork just means that she'll want to write more. Ahem. Yes. All right. I'm finished doing that for now.

****Disclaimer****: Hairspray isn't mine.

* * *

><p>Chapter Eight:

I Found My Way

Sleep, as one may have thought, did not come easy that night. Recollections and nightmares caused her to stir constantly, and it was only by remembering the secure feeling of Seaweed's arm draped over her waist did she calm a little. Everything about where she was right now, that state of bleak consciousness between slumber, was like submitting to a horrible game of risk, tiptoeing dangerously over feeble and unsupportive grounds. She fought to wake up on several occasions, but her eyes seemed hammered shut by the idea of

mental torture.

Visions of what could happen to her, or more frequently Seaweed, and of what her mother may be capable of, swarmed and destroyed any chances of a peaceful sleep. It was only when she felt the absence of Seaweed's embrace that she jerked awake, sunlight almost instantly streaming painfully into her eyes. She squinted, her heart pounding in her chest. Where had he gone? She chomped down repeatedly on the inside of her lip, annoyed by her lack of gum.

Had last night been a dream, orâ€¦ what? Penny had vaguely taken in her current appearance, and, when realization finally hit her, she felt abnormally self-conscious and even embarrassed. She had come over here like this? Pawing around the covers, she quietly slipped out of bed and began to scan the room thoroughly for a mirror, or vanity, or just something that she could look at herself in. Luck was apparently with her, for housed near the corner was a small, yet effective mirror. Barely taking any time to wonder how boys could manage with such a meager-sized thing, she wandered over and distractedly stared into it.

Her hair had tangled from the night before, the assault of rain only worsening the combination of her usually silky soft locks of hair and nearly a can of hairspray. Trying to run her fingers through it would only frustrate her further, so she didn't even bother.

Despite her clothes being the same, and her condition being something similar, there was a new feature that unmistakably stuck out to her. The place where her mother had struck her was no longer red, but a very pale shade of both blue and purple. Penny pressed her lips together and ran a couple of her fingers over it. There wasn't really any sting to it, physically-speaking, anyway.

"Penny!"

Practically jumping out of her skin, she briskly turned her head towards the direction of the voice, her hand still resting against her cheek awkwardly. Motormouth Maybelle stood in the doorway, an apron tied carelessly around her.

"I didn't know you were awake yet, sweetheart," Her facial features lit up as ventured into the room. Penny stared, uncomfortable, and at a loss of what to say.

"Ms. Maybelle, Iâ€¦ I'm sorry. I didn't know--I didn't mean to," She stopped herself, trying to gather what was left of her dignity. "What I meant to say was that Iâ€¦"

"Penny, honey, it's okay," Motormouth chuckled. "Seaweed told me what happened." Penny's shoulders dipped downward while her hand involuntarily slipped from its place on her cheek.

"Oh." Seeing as how Penny couldn't recall what all she had told Seaweed last night, or of what had even happened, really, she didn't know what to anticipate. Still, the teenager hardly expected for the woman to stare at her as intently as she was doing now.

"He didn't mention that bruise on your cheek, though," She observed, smiling sympathetically as Penny inwardly winced. "Run into somethin' on your way here, did you, girl?"

"I, uh," She shuffled her feet. Maybelle looked on, her eyebrows raising. "Could I please talk to Seaweed?" Motormouth Maybelle's maternal instincts kicked in with a crazy amount of force, and she, with a new look of heavy concern, nodded solemnly.

"Of course you can, sweetie. He's been out there waitin' for you to come about. Left outta here early this mornin' to try and let you sleep some more," She told her, with a gleam of fondness in her eyes. "I'll go and wake him up."

"No! You don't have t--"

"He's been worried sick about you, child. Now," She grinned thoughtfully to a flustered Penny. "Let me go get that boy up." Considering that the end of the conversation, Ms. Maybelle left the room in a charming manner, leaving Penny to her lonesome for a very short period of time.

Sighing, she ran her fingers over her cheek again just before taking a cautious seat on Seaweed's bed. As much as she wanted to be here, she still felt strangely out of place; or, perhaps, it was more that she was scared--scared that she could have possibly involved Seaweed's family, or even worse, Seaweed, in this ordeal. She wouldn't know what to do with herself if that happened.

"Good mornin', sweet girl," The sound of that familiar voice brought on a violent rush of satisfaction, and she could do nothing more than smile as he moved to sit next to her and then slip his arm around her shoulders, pulling her to him. "How'd you sleep?" Even though her eyelids were heavy with the proposal of sleep, she just couldn't tell him what had kept her up around the clock that night.

"Fine," She responded, her eyes trailing over the floorboards absentmindedly. Anyone and everyone knew just how 'good' of a liar that Penny Pingleton was, but Seaweed wasn't about to push her for something as trivial as sleep. On the other hand, bringing up what had happened last night wasn't such an easy task. For the longest time they merely sat there, enjoying one another's company while they twined and tangled their fingers together fondly.

When at last the silence started to really get to him, Seaweed cleared his throat and went for it.

"So," He began, not exactly sure how a conversation like this was supposed to start off. Luckily for him, just as he was about to open his mouth to spew out more inarticulate nonsense, Penny cut in quietly.

"My mama and I she," Penny stopped and looked up at Seaweed, who was staring down at her somberly. "She wasn't happy with me." She said at length, her voice dull. He ran his hand against her arm.

"Baby," He let his voice drift off, as if afraid of what he might actually say next. Seaweed knew that she didn't deserve any of this mistreatment, and to think that this was only the tip of the iceberg, well, he was more than just a little worried about her.

"But, it doesn't matter," Her gentle voice, as farfetched as the idea

was, almost startled him. "becauseâ€| she's wrong, about this more than anything else." Seaweed, though elated at the fact that he wasn't about to lose the girl he cared about so much, still found his heart aching for her. She was giving up a good bit, and all because she wanted to be with him. It was a pretty difficult aspect to swallow.

"I want to be with you, Seaweed," She stated with assurance, then turning to look towards him, her eyes glazed with conviction. He had to smile, however troubled he was for her. After a thought struck him, though, his expression darkened.

"What about your mama?" He asked, cutting back in to add on to that just before Penny opened her mouth to speak. "Iâ€| have a feelin' that that bruise didn't come from a fall." Penny slouched a tad more, suddenly overtaken with shame. Part of her had actually convinced herself that he would believe otherwise.

"Sorry," She mumbled, virtually incoherently. Seaweed's eyebrows rose.

"Angel, you've got nothin' on God's green earth to apologize for," He affirmed, resting one of his hands on hers. "I just don't want you gettin' hurt." That hand then rose to very softly graze her injured cheek with a few of its fingers.

"My mom was just angry," She insisted, hating the fact that, currently, as much as she disliked her mother for how she treated her, Penny had to talk as though her own parent was the supreme enemy. Few people actually wished for a such a negative bond with the woman that brought them into the world, and Penny was no different.

"Penny, she hit you," He stared at her, baffled as to why she had suddenly become so indirectly defensive. "No one deserves that, baby. Especially not you." Penny bit her lip, recognizing that well-known sensation of oncoming tears by the lump in her throat.

"I k-knowâ€|" She stuttered, crossing her arms with a reintroduced surge of insecurity. Seaweed frowned at once, obviously displeased that what he had said had upset her. He gently pulled her into his lap, wrapped his arms about her waist, and laid his chin upon her left shoulder.

"It's all right," He whispered delicately into her ear after hearing a few, quiet sniffles from her. The sniffles quickly turned into quiet sobbing, but Seaweed never once stopped in his attempts to calm her. "She's not gonna hurt you anymore."

Penny had always hoped so. Her mother rarely struck her like that, especially for something such as this. It had always been a bop on the nose, a twist of the skin on her wrists, a ruler to the back of her hands, or something similar to that. The last thing she would have expected was an all-out strike to her face. Her mother's ring, which she wore scarcely these days, had even scratched a welt into her cheek, too. Telling herself that she hadn't meant it would've been a lie, but Penny was content with that regardless.

As she began to settle down, she twisted her ankles around one another and stared off to her left. Seaweed watched her with silent

curiosity.

"Why is it that she can't just accept it?" Her eyes strayed up and down the walls and then back across the floor again. Seaweed lifted his chin from her shoulder and sighed, rubbing her shoulders comfortingly with both of his hands. "Why can't she accept _us_?" Penny inaudibly corrected herself, knowing that Seaweed was frowning himself, even if she couldn't see his face.

"Not everyone likes the idea of us being together," He replied truthfully, while she moved her head slightly to peer over her shoulder at him. "Some people get their kicks on bein' hateful, Penny. We just gotta look past that and keep our heads up." The corners of her lips straightened. "So long as we don't let it get to usâ€| they ain't won yet, and they never will." She felt compelled to smile after that. Turning sideways in his lap, she hooked her left arm around his neck and locked her eyes with his.

"Youâ€| really know how to make a girl feel better, Seaweed," She managed one, small giggle that brought a gigantic smile to his face.

"Well, baby, I got a great teacher," He noted proudly, which lead Penny to the conclusion that he had meant his mother. Her smile only grew.

"Yeah," She agreed. "I guess you do, don't you?"

* * *

>The two laughed to one another for a good ten minutes, canoodling and harmlessly flirting until Penny grudgingly slipped out of his lap. <p>"Mind if I go wash up?" Suddenly she had taken to her shy persona, if only because she had remembered what a sight she looked right now.<p>

"Nah, go ahead," A very indistinguishable sort of smirk overcame his expression as he thought he saw her blush. "The bathroom's right next door." He gestured one of his hands lazily towards his bedroom door. Penny nodded and then excused herself just as Seaweed tossed her a reassuring wink.

Washing her face was the only thing she had in mind, as she was certain she would turn cherry red at the idea of actually taking a bath here. She could do that after making and hopefully finalizing the plans of going to Tracy's.

Once she reached the sink, she gingerly turned on the water and waited for it to at least get lukewarm. It was refreshing on several accounts when she was finally able to rid her face of that disgusting feeling of rain-and-tear-sodden, caked make-up. In all honesty, it came as no surprise the she was rather mortified to be seen by Ms. Maybelle, much less Seaweed. She had always suffered at the hands of major self-esteem problems.

Even so, she soon finished her longer-than-expected face wash, only to become embarrassingly aware of the loud rumbling of her empty stomach as she clutched a dry towel to one of her flushed cheeks. Matters only worsened when she turned to find Seaweed at the door, one of his arm's propped against the side of it as he

grinned.

"Mama's got some food ready," He said sweetly, trying to keep himself from grinning too much at how cute and flustered she looked. Her face was the deepest shade of red that he had ever seen.

She felt her lips turn upwards, even while her eyebrows lowered, thus producing an entertaining look of humiliated pleasure.

"Thanks." Damage control wasn't even worth her money anymore. Taking no time to pick up the remaining pieces, she neatly hung the towel back where she had found it, and then followed Seaweed out of the bathroom. For a brief moment, she noticed Inez still dressed in her Sunday best, as much as that apparently aggravated her mother. But, in a flash, she muttered something quickly to Seaweed, and then darted back into his room while he waited there for her.

"Girl, go change outta them clothes," Maybelle scolded in the midst of setting another plate of food on the table. "You'll stain 'em." Inez grumbled, but then allowed her eyes to widen at the sight of Penny, just now returning to Seaweed's side after fetching his jacket to wear. Something about showing cleavage at the dinner table just didn't appeal to her.

"Oh," Ms. Maybelle smiled warmly. "Hey, you two. Take a seat!" She insisted, motioning to the three empty chairs. The couple sat down and shared a fond look with each other, causing Inez to groan. "Lunch'll be ready in a few."

Anyone in that room could tell that Inez was just about to explode with questions, but common courtesy appeared to be holding her back. It was that and the presence of her mother, anyway. But, as we all surely knew, a child staying quiet for an extended amount of time was virtually impossible.

"Did y'all two stay together last night, or somethin'?" She blurted out, honestly meaning nothing suggestive or rude about it. Curiosity had just finally gotten the best of her.

Penny, however, came all too close to choking on the water that Ms. Maybelle had just given her. It was at that moment that Seaweed knew he had been lying when he labeled her embarrassment in the bathroom as the reddest he had ever seen anyone. He had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing.

"Inez, don't go buttin' around in other people's business like that," There was Miss Motormouth, out to save the day once again.

"What?" She whined, her chest puffing out defensively. "I was just wonderin' how she got here. That's all."

"Penny just needed a place to stay the night," Seaweed said dismissively, hoping that she wouldn't decide that there was more to the story than that.

"Oh." She blinked, studying the girl across from her for quite some time, secretly causing Penny to shrink into her seat. "Okay, then." Inez was clearly still suspicious, but she was set on keeping quiet about it, at least until Penny had gone home.

"So, Penny," Maybelle called over to her from where she was stirring something intently on the stove. "Where will you be keepin' yourself?" She asked, trying to keep the conversation easy-going, regardless of how worried she was for her son's girlfriend. Penny looked over to Seaweed, who smiled encouragingly to her, and then looked over towards his mother.

"Well, ma'amâ€¦ I had planned on talking with Tracy," She wasn't sure how to answer that. Perhaps there was some hidden motive in what Ms. Maybelle had said, and she didn't know it. Fortunately for Penny, she was rewarded with a satisfied chuckle from the older woman.

"S'what I figured, darlin'," She swiftly cut the stove off and turned around. "You can give her a call after you eat somethin'. No girl of my baby's gonna go hungry in his household," She grinned wholeheartedly as she placed the last bit of food on the table.

Seaweed and Penny exchanged glances and smiled dotingly to one another. It was that one look that said all that they wanted to say to the other, without reserving Inez the right to lose her appetite right there at the table.

Penny was glad to be included in a great moment between such a wonderful family, and, to herself, hoped that there would be many more of these. They made her feel so much more at home than when she was at her own house, and that truly brought on one of the nicest feelings that she had ever felt (_besides_ the other obvious one, of course).

Taking a seat in her own chair, Maybelle looked over the three kids and smiled just as charismatically as ever. "Dig in, kids. I ain't above makin' you clean your plates when that stuff's gone cold, now."

* * *

><p>Kelsey Rose: That was a refreshing, one-chapter break from all of the drama and angst. 8) By the way, you guys are awesome! I felt the need to tell you again.

9. Much to Your Surprise

Kelsey Rose: I hate school. It takes up too much of my spare time. Seriously. I wanna write, and then it gives me writer's block. I wanna get something done, and it restricts me with work. Total unfairity. (Lovin' the KRinese, aren't ya?)

Disclaimer: See chapters 1-8 for a great example of what a proper disclaimer _should_ _look_ like! Fancy, eh?

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><p>Chapter Nine:

Much to Your Surprise

The weeks had slowly melted into roughly a month and a half, or it had at least been exactly that long since Penny had been freed from

her shackles and moved in with the Turnblad family for off-and-on periods of time.

Her mother had put up quite the fight when it came down to a final decision. She was, in fact, enraged at the idea of handing her child over to some heathen's family. After all, Penny was still "her daughter," as she had worded it, and the Turnblad's had "no right to keep her there against her will." Whosever 'will' Mrs. Pingleton had been talking about was still up in the air, because it was clear just how badly Penny had longed to get out.

In spite of everything, it was Penny's "complete lack of morality" that lead her mother to the conclusion to send her away for now, and to have her back any time she desired or requested. Penny had assumed it was simply because Prudy couldn't afford her a stay at some loony bin. But, whatever it was, she was still twice as thankful.

Tracy's parents and Tracy had gladly welcomed Penny, as often as she would come and go. But anyone with even a handful of brain cells could tell just where she was most happy. Yet, it was Seaweed in particular who had noticed her dramatic increase in mood as of late. It was like this had been a very literal case of a powerful weight being lifted from her shoulders; and nothing was valid when it came down to how very blessed he felt to constantly see that beautiful smile on her face again. There was the wide-eyed, beautiful soul that he had fallen in love with, and she was shining to her greatest possible potential more than she ever had before.

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>School had ended nearly two weeks ago, or thereabouts, and with that came the fresh burst of energy that was always coupled with the momentous words: summer vacation. Penny's mother had begun to make her return home more frequently, but the teenager really hadn't cared much. She was almost always preoccupied with fantasizing of what was to come.

It was summer, and she had Tracy, who had Link, and then she herself had a wonderful knight of her own. Those central points alone were enough to get her giddy and overly excited about her vacation. She hadn't been this thrilled in years, it seemed, and she was glad to absorb every last good feeling that came along for the ride.

"Trace!" She wailed blithely, her hands clasped to the sides of her mouth as she poked her head around a pillow that she held to her chest. "You've been in there for forever!" Her toes wiggled impatiently in their place beneath her as she studied her friend's closet from where she sat on Tracy's bed. It had been seven minutes, and still no Tracy. They had to hurry if they were going to get to the studio in time.

"I still can't find it, Penny," Tracy replied distractedly and with a brink of annoyance in her tone of voice, as she dug through shoes, dresses, skirts, blouses, sweaters, and oodles and oodles of other bits of clothing.

"Want any help?" Her friend offered, dropping to lie on her stomach lazily.

"No, no!" She clicked her tongue in thought. "I'm gonna find this."

Penny rolled her eyes good-naturedly and tipped her head to the side. Tracy had mentioned wanting to dress to kill today, as bizarre as that sounded to Penny. Didn't she always look amazing? She shook her head.

"I can't believe it!" Tracy grumbled suddenly, pulling Penny from her pointless staring.

"What?" Penny fluttered her eyes a few times.

"I bet'cha a million bucks that Mama hid it," Her voice sounded bitter, and the smaller girl was only left to imagine what in the world that could mean. Tracy walked a couple of paces away from her closet, and then, as if reading Penny's mind, turned to her best friend. "You know what I'm talkin' about." Penny stared at her with feigned understanding, and a cheesy grin to boot. "Remember that dress, the electric green and black one, the comes up to here!" she pointed mere inches above her knees. "and fits me absolutely perfectly?"

With such a hopeful look on her friend's face, Penny desperately combed through the large abyss of her memory bank to try and recall it. She pictured dress after dress, stylish fashion statement after fashion statement, and, for a very short while, she feared that she would upset Tracy further by living up to her oblivious depiction.

"Ooooh!" She peeped, pushing herself up to sit, cross-legged, before her company. "That one!" It was rather stunning on her, but, then again, so was anything else she wore. Tracy could show up in pajamas for The Corny Collins Show taping, and she would look gorgeous. "Why would she do that?"

Tracy sighed and fought back the craving to roll her eyes out of sheer agitation, not at Penny, but at her situation in general.

"Something about 'wanting her little girl to remain tastefully conservative forever,'" Tracy grinned and shook her head while Penny giggled. "I'll just wear that sequined blue one, I guess." Penny gushed.

"I love that one!"

The brunette smiled and retreated back into her closet to change. Penny was, once again, left to wait.

"Hey!" Tracy?" She said out of nowhere, and was almost surprised that it had actually come out of her mouth.

"Yeah?" Her friend called from her changing place. Penny breathed.

"Have you and Link?" Penny drilled the words over in her mind. "said anything to one another yet?" Somewhere in the midst of her assessment, she had fooled herself into thinking that that made any sense. Tracy stared at the other girl through her closet

door.

"That's kinda important in a relationship, don'tcha think, Penny?" Penny jolted from where she sat, staring at the floor, and then jumped to a position in which she sat anxiously on her knees.

"No! No," She calmed and then recomposed herself. "I meantâ€¦ have you guys said, wellâ€¦ you know," Penny swung her legs out from under her and let them hang over the edge of the bed.

"I love you?" Tracy offered, and Penny's face immediately twisted into an expression that greatly lacked any comprehension whatsoever.

"Iâ€¦ love you, too? But, that's not exactlyâ€¦"

Tracy chuckled.

"No, Pen." She shook her head again, regardless of the fact that Penny still could not see her do so. "Yes, Link and I have said that to each other." Penny suddenly felt very childish. "Why?"

"Just wondering," She glanced around, trying to get over her little slip-up. Tracy, who was now fully changed, stepped out and examined her.

"Penny, I know you better than that," _Of course she does_, Penny reckoned as that tiny, shy smile crept up on her face. "What's really going on?"

For an abnormal amount of time, Penny actually debated not telling Tracy, her best friend in the entire world, what was going on. But, once she remembered just who she was talking to, she finally came to her senses and took a few, quiet, deep breaths.

"It's just that," She creased her eyebrows and looked over to Tracy, who was now sitting next to her on the bed. "I really do love Seaweed, butâ€¦" Penny was forced to stop by the insane amount of squeals that came from Tracy.

"Penny, that's great!" Tracy beamed and hugged the confused redhead, sideways fashion, and then coughed a bit, still grinning. "Heh, sorry. Go ahead."

"I don't know how toâ€¦" She stopped. "when toâ€¦" Penny, having grown frustrated with herself, sighed loudly. "Should I tell him?" The words came out more quickly than she intended. Luckily, Tracy was used to that from her.

"If that's how you really feel, then, well, _yeah_." Tracy said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world, but Penny still didn't see it like that. "Penny, Seaweed's an amazing guy. _And_, I haven't seen you this happy since your mother took that two-week long missions trip to Tahiti."

They both laughed, and Penny recalled how they would joke about more realistic reasons to visit a place like Tahiti, even while it was clear that they were just glad Prudy was out of the country.

"I know," She confessed, shoving her hands into her lap warily. "I

just don't know what to say." Tracy eyed her playfully.

"Gee, Penny, it's three words."

"Tracy!"

Those defensive hands went up instantly. "I'm just messing with you. But, really: what's holding you back?"

My mother, people at school, fear of rejection, people in town, uncertaintyâ€| my mother. Penny had so many reasons, but something just kept her from them.

"I don't know," In any case, it wasn't as if that made her sound any more tough about it, or anything. Tracy continued to smile.

"Well, when you do decide to tell him, you shouldn't be worried," She said gently, noting the confusion on Penny's face. "He really does care for you Pennyâ€_a lot_. Anyone can tell." Penny noticed how her cheeks grew warmer when she thought about it, and how she couldn't resist the temptation to smile.

"Thanks, Trace." She said wholeheartedly, after a moment of thought. Tracy laughed once, stood, and then extended her hand to Penny.

"Anytime," Taking a quick glance at her wristwatch, Tracy pulled Penny to her feet, seeing as how she had since taken her hand. "Think you can run a few miles in under fifteen minutes?"

"I don't know, maybe. Why?" Penny looked at her strangely.

"'cause that's about all we got until rehearsals start!" Both of them shared knowing smiles and then darted out of Tracy's room, barely saying goodbye to her parents before they were out the door and on their way to the studio, with Penny lagging behind Tracy's powerful grip on her hand, as usual.

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>Having arrived with close to one minute left to spare, Penny regrettably found out that she wouldn't have time to greet Seaweed or Link. So, she moved aside, and made the best of it as the Council Kids danced away.<p><p>

This was a usual day for her, what with her being left to sit or stand around and observe. Seaweed's occasional glances would help greatly, but they were sporadic as the show and rehearsals demanded more and more of his attention.

Today, though, everyone seemed a little off to Penny. It wasn't necessarily her inner circle, but more of the other boys and girls that danced on the show. It seemed that whenever any of a certain few of them had the chance, they were together and talking as if they had their hands on some top secret information. Sometimes, Penny swore that she felt eyes on her, but had many times convinced herself to think nothing of it. These kids had better things to do than stare at someone like her, anyway.

As the minutes ticked away, Penny found herself amused with various,

insignificant, and, at times, silly things. She thought of how to unscramble the methods of confessing her feelings to Seaweed, but everything seemed to come out in even more puzzling combinations. Any way that she put it, it sounded awkward and forced, when all she wanted was for the moment to be and feel right.

And, much like her usual states of mindful unconsciousness, Penny had failed to stay alert.

"Hey there, little girl," She heard the voice, but at an instant realized that it wasn't really familiar at all. Still, she cringed slightly from unintentional fright, and turned around to see one of the Council Boys, Fender. Her interest was stimulated from the get-go.

"Erâ€¦ hi," Penny blinked and stared at him expectantly, silently inquiring his reason for approaching her like this. She supposed that she had missed the memo for a break, or something, but then became curiously aware of the rest of the kids still dancing over on the soundstage.

"I was wonderin' if, since you look like you've got nothing better to do, you could help me get something for Corny?" His composure was smooth, almost unbelievably so, but Penny knew that her common courtesy would never let her reject such a request as this.

"Uh, sure," She nodded hesitantly, and then eyed him as he produced somewhat of a grin-turned-smirk.

"Right this way," He said on the dime, as he began to lead her off to the side. Her eyes wandered for a couple of seconds, and she became pleasantly aware of how much closer the soundstage had gotten to her now. She could see Seaweed and her friends dancing stylishly and more intently than before.

"So, Penny."

"Huh?" She snapped her head back in his direction.

"That is your name, isn't it?"

She held back a laugh. "Well, duâ€¦I mean, yes. It is." Fender hardly took note to her falter.

"A pleasure to finally meet you in person, then." He smiled persuasively to her, and she twitched one eyebrow upward, but then decided to echo a meager smile herself.

"Thanks, uhâ€¦ you, too," Content with her answer, Fender began vaguely flipping through a few records before them, leaving Penny to stand there, mystified as to what her true task originally was. She honestly saw little reason to her being here.

"So, tell me what it's like," He said erratically, still thumbing through assorted 45's, among other things.

"What what's like?" She countered, staring at him, opposed to staring at what his hands were doing.

"Having your colored boyfriend on the show?" Fender remarked bluntly,

even while Penny thought that the 'colored' bit was vastly unnecessary.

"Oh," She stumbled over her words, and then her eyes suddenly lit up. "It's so great! I'm so happy for him, and for Tracy!" Penny began to say, her expression bright with the mentioning of her friends. She didn't even realize that Fender had moved closer to her, his eyes reflecting such evident disinterest. "I really hope that theyâ€" "

With what appeared to be near flawless timing, Penny felt lips pressed harshly upon her own. She gasped and peeled her eyes wide open, but his intense grip on her waist was what kept her from edging back or pulling away.

It was simple for him to sense her discomfort and alarm, but that only made the grip easier to maintain. Through her disbelief, he was able to slide his hands wherever they pleased, and in many places that Penny was overtly ashamed of. While she twisted against him, he harshly bit down on her bottom lip, causing her mouth to drop open in muffled pain. His tongue instantly darted into her mouth, which drew an unpleasant squeak from her.

Her face was completely flushed when the sound of the buzzer for the end of rehearsal went off, and while she blatantly refused to return any of his advances, she still could not pull herself away. The top two buttons on her dress had been undone, and her lips were bright and moist from his sloppy and vigorous kisses. She felt sick to her stomach almost as soon as he pulled away from her, that so-called flawless smile of his in full swing.

"Like I said," He said lowly, his tongue pointlessly rewetting his lips as he smoothed his hair and then slid his hands back in the pockets of his pants. "It was a pleasure to meet you." With a fiendish wink, he turned, but then stopped to call over his shoulder as he heard footfalls nearing them. "Oh, and," He kept himself from sneering any further as Penny began to feel herself churn with anger. "Thanks for the help, _princess_."

Penny narrowed her eyes and glared at the path he walked on as he disappeared into a select crowd of dancers. She felt disgusted, and her heart ached with the knowledge of what she had just done, even though not a bit of it was her fault. Supposedly, her sub-conscience had convinced her of another version entirely of what had just happened.

Biting back a few nasty retorts to the now-gone Fender, she whipped around, only to become chillingly aware of Seaweed's presence directly behind her, an undefined, lesser smile on his face. Penny jumped.

"Oh, hey, Seaweed!" She fought back all of the urges to leap into his arms and pine for comfort. Her defenses were outrageously high at this moment, and Seaweed had definitely noticed, but that wasn't everything he had seen.

"Hey, sweetness," He extended his arms and drew her into him. The muscles in Penny's face were almost visibly throbbing from how strongly she was willing herself to smile and act like everything was all right when, indeed, it was not. "How's my baby girl doin' today?"

He kissed one of her temples lightly, and when Penny's eyes traced over the undone buttons of her dress, her face paled.

"Much better now," She disclosed, a playful glint in her averted eyes as she swallowed hard many, many times, trying so desperately to keep herself from tearing up. As if the redness of her lower lip wasn't enough, then her face and lack of poise had the whole story written all over her. "I'm glad I got to see you today." All thoughts of revealing the depth of her feelings to him were completely lost in this unexpected tidal wave of events. Her knees were shaky, and she felt a terrible tingling sensation in her arms and fingertips.

"Mmhm. So am I," Seaweed rocked her back and forth very gently. Penny glanced up at him, searching his face.

"Are you all right?" She asked, hastily regretting bringing it up.

"Of course, baby. What makes you think I'm not?" His eyes met with hers, and she actually fought to hold his gaze.

"Iâ€"youâ€"you just," Her breath came out unevenly, and Seaweed even went so far as to flash a worried expression. "I can't blame you." She laughed it off slightly. "All of that dancing's gotta be something." He grinned and rested one of his hands on the small of her back.

"Ya ain't even seen the half of it, darlin'," He positioned that same hand against her nearest hip. She reacted by resting her head against his chest guiltily.

"I can only imagine."

"Girl, I know you can hold your own," He smirked to her. "I've seen how you do it." Penny blushed.

"I could never do anything like this, though," She reasoned, her eyes stalking the ground quietly. Seaweed looked at her in playful defiance.

"And why's that?"

"Stage fright," Penny stated, her expression locked. He chuckled.

"A pretty lil' thing like you? That's a bunch'a bull," He nearly purred as he turned her about to face him, pleased to see that his statement had etched a tint of color to her cheeks.

"Say what you want, but it's true," She nestled up against him like before, and found that her eyes fell upon a group of about four or five who were remarkably looking in her and Seaweed's direction.

Normally that wouldn't faze her, given the standards of the '60's society, but the way that they sneered so derisively and deliberately really got beneath her skin. She was rapidly pit against the urge to run over and knock some sense into each and every one of them. It looked as though Seaweed's embrace was the only tangible aspect that was holding her back.

"You didn't get into any trouble during rehearsals, now, did you?" Seaweed teased her with little outward motivation, even if it still crafted a look of absolute horror on Penny's face.

"Nô€|ope," She pressed her lips together tightly, feeling the uncomfortable dryness that had graced her mouth out of the blue. "No trouble here!" Her voice squeaked, and she was left with few options but to laugh it off.

"Okay, okay," He leaned forward to kiss her forehead, and then released his hold on her. "What do you say that you and I go grab a bite to eat at my place, huh?" Penny perked up straight away.

"Really? I'd love that!" She exclaimed, her eyes brimming with delight. It was always a pleasure to eat with his family, and, even if Ms. Maybelle and L'il Inez weren't there, she had the opportunity to bond with Seaweed even more.

"Right, then," He felt his mood escalate a bit more when her reaction came into play. "I'll go tell Tracy and them where we're headin'. Meet'cha at the stage door?"

"Sure thing!" She wanted so badly to feel the usual happiness that she felt when she found out she was going to his house to eat with him, but she just couldn't, not for how guilt-ridden and filthy she was feeling.

In silence, she shuffled her feet over to the stage door, catching Fender's as well as a couple of the Council Girls' eyes as she made her way over. She tried to make nothing of it, and simply focus on keeping herself together. Penny battled so recklessly with the invitation of breaking down.

Amidst her crazy life at home, the high expectations laid upon her, the status of Tracy's life, the weight she assumed she was placing the Turnblad household, and now _this_, _she was feeling that she really couldn't take much more without just thoroughly losing it. And, to think, now she had hurt one of the closest people to her, the boy that she loved with all of her heart, but had yet to tell him so. She didn't know what to do.

Seaweed seemed to take his time, but Penny was too distraught to notice. His steps were heavy, and his eyes betrayed how he wanted to feel. He could very easily tell that Penny was upset, and that alone was enough to put him in a similar mood. But, it was why she was distressed that really irked him.

He thought with her that things would be different. She never, ever seemed like the type of girl who would go to such lengths. Penny was so calm and collected and virtually dripped with positive intentions. Now he was, unfortunately, beginning to rethink that about her. Perhaps it was just the sheer jealousy talking, but he couldn't shake the image from his mind.

The fact of the matter was that, Seaweed _had _seen the two of them together, and Penny had consciously avoided the subject when he had gone to her. He couldn't figure out what part of it hurt him worse: her lying about it or that it had actually happened.

Smiling to her from across the studio, he made his way over, and offered her his hand, which she swiftly took.

"All set?" He questioned, his gaze placed fondly upon her. Penny, though waging war with her balance and the unexplainable looks that that particular group of kids was still giving them, nodded gently, and, unknowingly, lived up to another one of her awkward choices of wording.

"As always."

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><p>Kelsey Rose: Pray that school doesn't kill me. Please and thanks.

10. Hear My Plea

****Kelsey Rose****: Uhm, yeah. :D Here I am. Thanks to Nor for proofreading this for me. -love-

****Disclaimer****: These things annoy me. We have made it clear I don't own Hairspray.):

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><p>Chapter Ten:

Hear My Plea

Few minutes went by that Penny didn't feel like the world's worst person. Ever since that confrontation with Fender she had been far more on edge than she had been in months, and she would have been kidding herself if she said her friends and mother didn't notice. Prudy had jumped right on it, claiming that she was suddenly possessed by evil spirits for all the sins she was committing, but Penny just as easily ignored her. Tracy and Seaweed, however, were more than just a teensy bit worried about her.

She was an effortless target for fright. Tracy had asked her about it on several occasions, but she was clever enough to avoid the subject on her own right. That was when Tracy knew that something was either very wrong, or was being blown out of proportion. Penny wasn't usually one to clam up like she had been for the past few days.

It was when she began stalling her meetings with Seaweed that Tracy felt vindicated. She wasn't taking 'no' for an answer any longer. So, one August afternoon, when they were on their way to a Corny Collins Show hosted sock hop, Tracy cleared her throat and stared over at the daydreaming redhead.

"What's on your mind, Penny?"

"Me?" Penny perked up and, without any further warning, felt her pulse quickening as she thought that she may be required to lie to her best friend yet again. "I'm okay, justâ€¦ tired. I think a lot when I get tired." Tracy was hardly convinced.

"Well, if you don't feel well, then maybe this party isn't just a good idea€"

"No!" She snapped hastily in response, causing Tracy to jerk back slightly in surprise. "Iâ€"sorry. I'm fine, really. I just gotta wake up a little bit more. That's all." The big-haired brunette stared at the watch on her wrist with one eyebrow raised.

"Penny, it's five 'til four."

Guess I'm more out of it than I thought.

Penny dreaded the idea of being in the presence of the whole Council again today. They had become more openly cynical to her, and it all but boosted her morale.

"I'll be okay," Penny said quietly, her eyes dragging their path over to meet with Tracy's. Evidently, the girl whom she called her best friend still was not having it. "Prooomiiiiise!" She added slowly and deliberately this time. Even if Penny knew that Tracy didn't believe her, the way that the other girl solemnly nodded in reply let her know that she at least still had time to gather her thoughts together for a better presentation.

How silly this whole ordeal probably appeared had certainly become apparent to Penny, but she was too thin-skinned to let this fly over her head. If there was one thing she had learned throughout her years it was that emotional pain hurt, and she was going to do everything within her power to keep that from ever happening to Seaweed, to Tracy, or to anyone she loved or respected. In her mind, no one was deserving of a feeling like that, ever.

While locked in her dreamy state of mind, Penny took notice to Tracy's slower pace as they neared the sock hop. They still had about a mile to go and less than five minutes to get there. So, she didn't find much logic in this.

"Trace? C'mon! We're gonna be lateâ€"| again," Penny willed herself to chuckle optimistically. "You've gotta get a good spot this time!"

The look on Tracy's face immediately shot Penny's artificial good mood down.

"You're really worrying me," Tracy said frankly. The left corner of Penny's lips yanked downward inadvertently. "And not just me, either." Penny silently prayed that she wouldn't say it. She didn't need to hear it for herself. "Seaweed's probably going nuts trying to figure out what's been wrong with you these past few days."

"Can we just talk about this later?" Penny, as she attempted to speed up her own walking pace, had almost lowered herself to begging and pleading, but Tracy was forever steady with a stern air of concern.

"Penny, you're acting like you killed someone," She stopped walking all at once and turned to look at her. "What's going on? Did something happen with your mom? What?"

"It's notâ€"| Penny couldn't quite word it. Well, it was either that

or she was too scared to let it come out of her mouth. "Tracy, I didn't mean toâ€" "

"Oh, Tammy, look!" The voice came so randomly that both Tracy and Penny were caught off guard. The appearance of Shelley and Tammy were then noted as the duo approached them, Shelley more sharp-faced than ever. "Well, if it isn't Penny Pingleton." Shelley worked with a smile that was even more fake than Amber von Tussle's, which was definitely saying something.

"Hey, girls," Tracy grumbled slightly, annoyed that they had been so rudely interrupted. Penny, on the other hand, was just shocked that they had come over to greet her.

"You've got someone who's waiting to see you at the hop, Penny," Shelley chimed as though the news were more precious than the world itself. "You lucky girl, you."

Penny cringed. What in God's name could she be talking about? The only people that Tracy and she were planning on meeting were Link, Seaweed, and maybe L'il Inez. Shelley suddenly jabbed Tammy in the arm.

"Isn't that right, _Tammy_?"

All eyes were on her now. Though, it was rather unsettling to see such a characteristically cheerful girl go from a feeble, hollow expression to one that mimicked what Penny had come to know as the 'Fake Council Girl Face.'

"That's right," Tammy tried a smirk, but even Penny could tell that something was threatening to eat her alive. As to what it was, she would probably never know.

"Soâ€| don't keep him waiting, hmm?" Shelley rolled her eyes to what seemed to be everyone within a thirty mile radius. "Later, you two!" She called, beckoning Tammy to head back to the building which, unknown to Tracy and Penny, had been closer than they thought throughout all of their seriousness.

Pushing aside the barked, "Come on, Tammy!" from Shelley as the departing girls continued walking, one with dragging feet, Penny stared at the establishment across the street from them, trying her hardest to ignore the wide-eyed look Tracy was giving her.

"Penny," She blinked, her eyes attempting to choose between sympathy, anger, and confusion. "Are youâ€|"

Was she what? Cheating? Yes. Well, no. No, she wasn't. Penny was just at a loss. She knew what she should say to Tracy, and yet, her guilt was stabbing deep holes into her heart.

"I'll see you inside," Penny mouthed the words, stunned that they actually formed sounds and accurate syllables. "Go see Link. He's probably looking for you."

Sensing her inner turmoil, Tracy touched Penny on one of her hands and looked up at her. They shared a single look, and then both knew what the other was saying. Tracy would always be there for her, and Penny knew it. But, she just could not bring herself to something

such as this. It made her feel foul and almost unworthy, and she was so sick of those feelings.

Penny watched as Tracy made her way across the street, leaving the teenager alone in her thoughts. She could go home now and risk grief from her mother, go inside and risk more confrontation, or just go inside and have no confrontation, butâ€"insteadâ€"have a good time with her friends and boyfriend. The latter sounded so promising, but she was still frightened. As if screwing up once was enough, did she really need to screw up twice in the course of just a few days?

She had to remind herself to breathe again as she crossed the street and hovered near the entrance of the building. Watching as couples and friends wandered in, bright-eyed and smiling, was only half of the torture. She practically had to force herself into the hop. If it weren't for the fact that Tracy, Link, and Seaweed were already inside, she would've run, tail between her legs, long ago.

After nodding her compliance to the police officer at the door, she slipped inside, immediately aware of how typical the atmosphere was. People were dancing in sync, chatting in the corner, and heading to the concessions stand off to the side. She had been here before. She knew what to expect. And, even so, for some odd reason, she was still a bundle of worry and unfathomable nerves.

The dry feeling in her mouth was frustrating. She was really taking this a step too far. Not to mention, she was giving herself a sorry case of whiplash from jerking her head this way and that, looking for someone, anyone, to help her out of this unfortunate situation.

She really needed to relax, preferably before her heart rate shot through the roof. Composing herself, she hobbled over to the concessions stand, soon quietly mumbling to the worker her request of water. He had nodded, and left her to stand there, with one of her elbows propped against the counter top as she stared around with little intent.

Something about all of this was just a little too perfect. Someone as attractive and 'successful' as Fender shouldn't have even bothered messing with a girl like her. What could she bring him, anyway? She was a nobody, a locked up, rebellious Catholic girl with very small promise in life. Or, at least, that's where she was heading, at this point.

Hearing the cup of water slide her way, she muttered her appreciation to boy behind the counter and took it between her fingers. She made a point not to break the cup from her smothering grasp as she brought it to her lips, the cooling sensation of water against the back of her throat almost soothing the virtually choking feeling of someone's hands upon her hips.

For a single moment, she had cast the illusion that it would be Seaweed, and that a few days ago had never happened. But, the eyes and brain could only do so much.

She felt her lips curl back in a deadly, silent snarl as she whipped around to stare at her shadow.

"What do you want from me?" She demanded, almost pleading. The wounding expression stitched upon the boy's face was enough to leave

Penny justified for what she longed to do so badly.

"Just go with it, sweetheart," He drew her into him, the water in Penny's hand threatening to crash soundlessly to the ground. She instantly squirmed against him. "Come on. It's a big step from some Negro boy. You know that." Penny felt angry tears stinging in the corners of her eyes.

"Leave me alone," She whimpered, her voice so low that it was no wonder the worker behind the counter hadn't even done so much as move. "_Please_."

"What was that?" Fender hissed, letting his hands trail down the curves of her back and spine. Penny felt so helpless and disgusted. As he brushed his teeth against her exposed neck, she could only think of one thing to do. Lifting her hand, she tossed her near full cup of water right into his face. He immediately recoiled, a look of twisted anger spreading over his facial features like wildfire.

"You little slut!" He cursed at her, his fingernails digging into her wrists so tightly that she dropped the empty cup with a startled squeak. Ruthlessly and painfully, he pressed his lips to hers, biting down so hard upon her bottom lip that she feared it would actually draw blood. Writhing and moaning in agony, she dug her own fingernails into the base of his neck. It was only when her eyes flew open through all the torment that she caught sight of something so alarming.

Acting as if he himself had received the same signal, Fender pulled back from her, his eyebrows knitted irritably. Though, before he even thought to leave and readjust his blazer, he leaned down, fixed a smirk on his ghastly expression, and pressed his lips dangerously close to one of her ears.

"Let's see you even _try_ to fix this one."

Penny's eyes peeled open in horror. It wasn't until he winked spitefully and walked away, completely unruffled by what had just happened, that she began to think logically again. Disregarding how nauseous she felt, and the metallic taste in her mouth, she shuffled over in what seemed to be a random direction.

Her movement only became clear as she saw a very familiar, darkened form slip out of the building, out of her reach. She felt, at that moment, a giant, invincible barrier had just wriggled its way between the two of them.

"Seaweed! Seaweed, wait!" She begged, her voice prone to breaking as it rose.

* * *

>Penny managed to slip past the crowd with a bit of effort. Much to her surprise, she caught him standing outside, his back pressed heavily against the brick wall of the building. The words were jumbled in an incomprehensible mess within her throat, and she felt herself strangling back cries and tears.<p><p>

Forcing herself to take a step towards him, she almost lost her footing as she saw him put one of his hands up in unintended defense,

or perhaps to stop her in her tracks. She really couldn't tell, nor did she want to know.

"Hey, it's cool," He mumbled, a sigh rushing past his lips as he brought his eyes up to look at her. "I get it."

"Seaweed, _no_," Penny began to say, her aching, lower lip beginning to quiver slightly. "It's not like that. I swear!" She didn't know how to convince him of what had really been going on, or of what had really happened those short days ago.

"Penny," Seaweed glanced at her gently, his eyes clearly filled with hurt, even though he wouldn't dare say it. "If that's the way you want itâ€" He stopped himself, trying to hide any hint of surprise at how shocked she looked just then. "If he's who you wanna be with, thenâ€" | "

"No!" She nearly suffocated on the word as it left her mouth. For some, unknown reason, Seaweed began to feel a round of anger rise within the pit of his stomach and the cage of his chest.

"Penny, I _saw_ you with him the other day," He said, much more sharply than he intended to. Still, something sparked when he saw that she looked about to give some half-wit excuse. "You don't have to hide it. I saw it. I just thought you'd be straight up with me about it." He stared off to the side. "Guess not."

"What?" She swallowed hard, not even bothering to tend to her bruised spirit.

"You knew you could tell me anything, Penny," He scuffed his feet on the ground and turned to her, a solemn look on his face. Penny could only imagine how ridiculous and distressed her face looked right now. "Look, if you don't wanna do thisâ€" "

"Seaweed, please," Her shoulders fell forward, hunched, as she tried to collect herself, but, of course, to no avail. "It isn't like that. You don't understand!"

"What's it like, then, huh?" He asked bitterly, hating himself immensely for the tone of voice he had begun to use with her.

"Heâ€" | Iâ€" | " Penny fought back so intensely to keep her eyes dry, especially in front of him. "He came to _me_. I would never, ever do that to you." _I love you too much._

He wanted to believe her. He really and truly did. But, he had been with girls before her who had said similar, if not exactly the same, things. It was hard to take what she said to heart, even when he knew she was different than them. And Penny could tell by the dullness in his eyes that he didn't believe her. That was what really tore her to millions of pieces.

"You have to believe me!" Penny edged closer to him, only to be met with an expression of uncertainty and dejection. "Seaweedâ€" | " She said his name so softly, that it was a wonder he actually heard her.

"Baby," He, at last, reached out to touch her on one of her wrists, which inevitably caused her to flinch. "If there's one thing in this

world that I want, it's for you to be happy. Whether that's with me or not, well, that's up to fate to decide. But," Seaweed released his tender grip on her. "if he's what makes you happy, then who am I to keep you from that?"

"I'm happy with you." Penny dropped her hands to her sides. Seaweed, in all of his frustration and hurt, just couldn't bring himself to trust her right now. She was one of the most genuine girls he had ever met, or been with, and yet, here she was, proving his theories about her to be wrong.

"Penny, it's cool. Don't worry about it. This way things'll be easier for you, anyway," He slid his hands into his pockets despondently. Penny feared for something like this. Surely all of this couldn't be because of Fender not being one ofâ€¦ color. Seaweed wasn't like that. He was accepting and loving of everyone.

"Seaweed, you aren't sayingâ€¦" Penny bit her tongue and suddenly felt lightheaded. He quickly moved to pull her into a soft embrace. She practically melted into his arms as the tears finally began to fall, a steady flow of gasps and whines soon attempting to surface, as well.

They stayed like that for a few more seconds before he carefully pulled away, reluctant to let her slip out of his arms.

"I'll see you, angel," he whispered somberly, purposefully avoiding eye contact. He couldn't bare to see her cry anymore. "If you come around," Seaweed balled one of his hands into a tight, numbing fist. "You know where I'll be." Fighting back the urge to kiss her with unraveled passion one last time, he let his hand slip off where it rested on her arm and then turned, leaving the hop and Penny behind him.

Watching him leave was one of the hardest things she had experienced in a long time. The crying swiftly grew to hushed sobbing as she cowered against the same wall he had been leaning against just moments beforehand. This couldn't be happening. This wasn't it; it wasn't over. It couldn't be over.

She draped her arms around herself. A vast sensation of emptiness had hit her so harshly that she fought to keep herself upright. She had just lost one of the most important people in her life, and she didn't know what to do with herself. No one, save Tracy, would understand why this would be such an impact on her life.

This couldn't have been how fate, as he had said, wanted it. She would have known if this was right, or if it felt so. But, it didn't. It felt wrong and unwarranted, like it was an expected stroke to the big picture of things.

And, if it weren't for the giggling and low muttering from somewhere behind and aside her, she would have continued to think that this was just all her fault when, clearly, it was not.

* * *

><p>Kelsey Rose: Eheheheeee. I'm too attached to certain characters.

11. How Times Have Changed

****Kelsey Rose****: What's this? Me updating Otherwise?
Yay!

****Disclaimer****: I don't own Hairspray.

* * *

>The August breezes weren't doing anything to soothe her now. Her eyes burned, but still her tear ducts insisted on straining every last tear from them. She didn't know why this hurt so much. She knew that she shouldn't let herself hurt this much. Seaweed wouldn't want it; Tracy wouldn't want it; and she, of course, had no desire to submit herself to unnecessary amounts of pain.<p><p>

As if listening to Prudy on an everyday basis wasn't enough already. Her mother would leap ten feet in the air for joy when she found out.

Penny didn't want to give her that satisfaction.

As she listened vainly to the sounds of her faltering breath, she stayed with her shoulder to the wall, her back turned to the entrance. She wasn't aware that anything had changed or moved from the door until she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Penny?"

Tracy had called her name so weakly and apprehensively, that Penny hadn't even been shocked from the touch to her shoulder. She merely turned around to face her friend, embarrassed that she had been found out. Tracy had seen her cry so many times. She had to be sick of it by now.

Much to Penny's surprise, however, Tracy's mouth had dropped open slightly as she reached out and took her friend's hand comfortingly. She looked like she wanted to say something, but Penny quickly took control of the situation.

"I think I'm gonna head home," She mumbled, "or something."

"Penny," Tracy bit her lip, desperately wanting to convince her to talk about it. Penny kept so many things to herself, and she didn't want this to be another one of those things. She sighed. "Want me to walk with you?"

"No," Penny replied firmly, her teeth clamping down on the inside of her mouth harshly. "You stay here with Link. You guys don't get to see each other enough during the summer."

"But, you know that you always come first, Penny," She was a difficult one to plead with, but Tracy was going to try her hardest. Penny shook her head, her arms still wrapped around herself loosely.

"Really, Tracy," She forced a makeshift smile and tipped her head to the side slightly. "I'll be fine," Penny reassured her, her eyes

drifting off to the side, before reluctantly returning to Tracy with their illusion of happiness. "Go have fun with Linkâ€¦ please?" Please? Penny wondered why in the world _that _had come out of her mouth. Tracy sighed. She hated giving up this easily, but it was clear that Penny wasn't budging.

"Okay," She glanced up at her friend, worry heavy in her eyes. "But, Pennyâ€¦ if you," Tracy paused, searching for her words carefully. "I mean, if you need to talk to someone, don't hesitate. You're always welcome at my house. You know that," She smiled fondly at her and gently drew her into a hug. Penny stayed like that with her for a moment, and then pulled back, a tiny smile forcing its way onto her features. "Call me later, okay?" When Tracy saw Penny nod, she smiled, waved goodbye to her, and slowly went back inside.

Tonight was one of those nights that her mother had strongly requestedâ€¦_demanded_â€¦that she come home and sleep at her own house. Penny didn't argue; although, now, she was actually glad that she had not. Out of all the people one would think she didn't want to be around at the time like this, she was actually _okay _with going home to her mother. Maybe then she wouldn't feel so horrible; maybe then she could console herself with the intemperate words of her mother.

She supposed that she could handle 'I told you so's' much better than explanations of why or how things happened.

* * *

>When Seaweed returned home that night, he wasn't shocked by the look of surprise on his mother and little sister's faces. Usually, on the day of a sock hop, he was out until late, but it was barely dark outside, and he was already home. For them, that was an immediate red flag.<p><p>

He walked in silently, unbuttoned his blazer, and stared off into space. Seaweed sat uncomfortably on his bed, his hands resting on his knees. Truthfully, he wasn't sure what he was supposed to be doing, or, more appropriately, what had just happened. It was all a whirlwind of raw emotion, resentment, and something else, the major factor, that annoyed the hell out of him. He was _jealous_. But, if what Penny had insisted was true, then what was he supposedly 'jealous' of? It was a very good possibility that he had just seriously screwed everything over.

Rubbing his face with his shaky, clammy hands, he stared out his window. Pride and a regretful tug at his heartstrings kept him from rushing off to her now. He had already caused her enough negative sentiments that were just completely uncalled for that was no point.

Seaweed pushed himself off his bed and curled his fists at his sides. He didn't want to be angry with her, but he was. Consequently, that had put him in a very pissy mood, which he also resented himself for. Excuses clouded his mind; they screamed at him so loudly that he could barely think straight, much less trudge around his room angrily.

On one hand, he felt as though he desired to be with her, and yet, on the other, he knew that so long as she was happy, that that would be

more than enough for him. Still, anyone with a brain knew that that was a sick and twisted representation of love. Lack of confidence was a relationship's greatest downfall; however, diffidence would always weigh heavy on any heart with so much as a speck of humility.

"Damn," He cursed under his breath, his right hand rubbing its fingers rhythmically against his forehead before sliding back over his hair. Confidence had nothing to do with it. It was now and forever would be jealousy. So, the big question was: Why? Why the hell was he so jealous?

Was it because he of Fender's fame, his looks, his status at school? Or, was it because he was white?

Seaweed paused and rang his hands idly. Was that honestly it? He didn't like to think so. Truly, he liked to think that he accepted everyone, regardless of anything. This case should be no different. He shook his head. He was thoroughly convinced that skin color had nothing at all to do with thisâ€"even if, deep down, somewhere, he knew that it had everything to do with it.

There was a new thought right there. The Corny Collins Council Members had always basically left them alone up until now.

Seaweed caved. He didn't want to think about it anymore; not when he knew Penny was probably hurting (or so he, in a very unclear and almost unusual way, hoped), and not when, if this was a case of harass-and-run, he would be giving whoever it was the satisfaction they were most likely drooling and pining for.

Up until today, he had always thought he of himself as a very grudge-free and easygoing guy, but the moment that they began to drag the girl that he loved more than life itself into the picture, he knew that he wasn't just about to let it go.

He needed closure, in the form of something.

* * *

>Any hope of closure for both sides had been put on the backburner, though only momentarily. It had been weeks since either had spoken to one another, and Penny felt as though she was being far too obvious about it. Her mother had practically laughed in her face about it, and to walk in public, without him, she didn't feel right. She felt upset, of course, but she also felt something else, something that she didn't like to think she had resorted to.<p><p>

She was angry. Even Tracy wasn't aware that she felt this way, but she couldn't help it. What had she done wrong, anyway? What gave him any right to distance himself from her when she was completely in-the-right as far as everything went? Penny had yet to figure it out, and she had found that she hated thinking about it. It only made her miss his captivating touch even more.

But, she was trying not to think like that, not today. It was the first day of their junior year, and she didn't want it to turn sour, like everything else seemed to be doing.

Penny was waiting for Tracy and Link near the front steps of

Patterson Park High School, her books clutched nervously to her chest. She was already vastly uncomfortable, though, only because of the mocking looks that various Council Members had been giving her as they walked into the school. It was such a relief to finally see her best friend and her best friend's boyfriend finally wander up, with Tracy slightly out of breath.

"Hey, Penny!" She chirped, smiling ear-to-ear. "Can you believe it? We're _juniors_!" Tracy glanced over at Link, who smiled at her, though a little distractedly. Penny chuckled softly and brushed a few strands of her hair from her shoulders. It was down, wavy, and as red as ever; Tracy herself couldn't believe how different, but crazy gorgeous her best friend looked. She had never seen her like this before.

"Yeah," Penny replied, her gaze still that soft, injured one that Tracy had, sadly, become acquainted with over the past few weeks.

"You and I have three classes together, Pen," Tracy went on excitedly. She reached out and touched Penny on one of her hands before she glanced back at Link to squeeze one of his hands affectionately. "And Link and I have one together, too." Penny forced a small, but genuine smile for Tracy.

"I can't wait."

Tracy paused, noticing the delayed reactions she was getting from both Link and Penny. Link glanced between the two, and then looked around for a few more seconds before turning back to Penny.

"You two seen Seaweed lately? I feel like I haven't talked to him in forev-" Link was about to continue when Tracy jabbed him roughly in the arm. He grunted in protest, and then looked at her sharply. She glared at him threateningly, and he quickly realized his mistake. Penny winced, but Tracy managed a tiny, nervous smile.

"Hey, Penny, don't-" Tracy tried to cut in afterwards, but Penny just shook her head slowly, that detached smile returning.

"I think I'm going to go," Penny said indecisively, as if she seriously doubted that was what she wanted to do. Tracy frowned, and Link glanced off to the side again, his eyes trailing after some particular student in mob of kids gathering outside. "I'll talk to you guys laterâ€¦ okay?"

"Okay," Tracy sighed. She had finally given in to the facts: Penny was immeasurably difficult to argue with. "See you in class, Penny."

"Later," Link called absentmindedly, as Penny turned on her heels and began to walk towards the school. Her head was down, and her mind racing. Just as she was about to start up the small steps to the front doors, she felt herself collide with someone. Her books practically flew out of her arms, and she had to fight just to keep from toppling over. Yet, there was a strange sense of familiarity about the person that seemed to be awkwardly grabbing for her books. She felt as though she should have known by the mere scent of them, but she didn't want to seem desperate.

She breathed, her heart caught in her throat. Penny tried to calm her trembling hands as she fumbled for her books that he held out rather unenthusiastically to her. Seaweed stared at her, his expression virtually blank.

Penny was at a loss for words. She didn't even care that a small crowd had formed near them, their eyes wide at the whole scene. Her eyebrows furrowed suddenly, and she, in her almost dreamlike state, shoved past him, her shoulder knocking brusquely against his. She had to fight back tears, but she didn't even bother with keeping her shoulders back or head up. There was no way and no reason for her to feel proud for what she had just done.

Her opportunity to reconcile was lost, and all because she was too angry, hurt, and embarrassed to confront him then and there. She wasn't one to put her relationships on display, nor was she one for any sort of confrontation. Whether or not that was shone by the faint purple and blue tints around her wrists or not was completely beyond her.

She could just convince herself that she didn't care, that she didn't want for them to get back together, and that she didn't want to have to risk everything to see him again, but she would be lying to herself so hard that even she wouldn't be able to handle it. So, she had just walked away.

After all, it had worked with everything else before. Why couldn't it work now, with this?

* * *

>Seaweed could only stare after Penny as she walked inside with masked disbelief. If there wasn't a more childish retort than that, then he didn't know what was. He sighed heavily and moved past all of the gathering students. They were mumbling under their breaths, but he wasn't so naïve as to remain deaf to everything they were saying.<p><p>

This morning and this incident had reminded him just how much he needed a resolution from all of this. He had decided long ago that he was going to get it no matter what. In spite of this, he had never once set a date for the ever-important _when_.

Penny's stunt just now had finalized everything: _It was going to be today._

If not today, then he was going to make damn sure that it was within the week. The train had pulled out long ago as far as ridiculousness went, and he had had enough. This needed to be settled, if only their part of it. He, if only for the moment, no longer cared who else had any part of this.

This was between Penny and himself, and he wasn't about to let either of them go on like this. If she didn't love him like he loved her, then he wanted to hear that directly from her mouth, with just the two of them there as witnessesâ€”no shackles, no chains, no pressure, no _anything_.

Seaweed shoved his hands into his pockets, his eyes wandering aimlessly until they landed on Tracy and Link, who appeared to

heading towards the school building. Gathering up his words, he walked towards them, forcing a fraction of his usual smile.

"Hey, Trace, Link," He regarded her with a nod, and then did the same for Link. "Can I ask a favor?"

The question was sort of random, but Tracy looked on, wide-eyed and hopeful. This could be it. Maybe Penny and he would finally make amends!

"Of course! Anytime," She chimed in, leaving Link to stand there once again, wordless and distracted.

"Inez was sorta hopin' that Penny was still up for goin' out to eat with Mama and her tonight. Could you guys tell her to be there at sevenâ€¦ if she's still interested?" Seaweed said lamely with a shrug, lying through his teeth. Tracy blinked, shared a confused glance with a preoccupied Link, and then looked back to Seaweed. As far as she knew, Penny had never made any plans to go out to eat with Ms. Maybelle and L'il Inez. Butâ€¦ who was she to argue?

"Sure, Seaweed," She smiled warmly, and somewhat sympathetically. "I'll tell her."

"Thanks, Trace," Seaweed returned her genuine smile, and then nodded to the couple. "I'll catch you two later, a'ight?" He turned his back to them and began up the stairs once more, heading inside.

It was a low blow, but he had to do it. If playing the guilt and forgetfulness card on Penny's extremely guilt-ridden conscience was what he had to do to see her and get that promising moment alone with her, then he was more than 'just okay' doing it.

Besides, if there was one thing he knew about Penny, it was that she was never one to back down from anything. So, everything was set and near flawless. Now all he had to do was anticipate.

12. Without A Doubt

****Kelsey Rose****: Fair warning: spiciness shall now ensue. Thanks to my girls, Tracy and Nor, for helping me in various ways with this.

****Disclaimer****: Don't own Hairspray. Nooope.

* * *

>When Tracy had mentioned that Penny was due to spend time with Seaweed's mother and little sister, Penny had been more than just slightly surprised. She had asked her best friend a good ten times, or more, if this was true, or if she had honestly forgotten, but Tracy had insisted it was all straight from the Stubbs family themselves. <p>"He just told me to remind youâ€¦ you know, if you did want to go still," Tracy had said, very careful about her words.<p>

"Agh!" Penny recalled rubbing her face so furiously with her hands that she wondered how her skin could even bare it. "I would never cancel plans with Ms. Maybelle and L'il Inez, Tracy, butâ€¦ I just

don't know."

"I understand, Penny," Tracy replied sadly, her voice full of sympathy for her friend. "But, it's not like he'll be there, though. So, it shouldn't be awkward, right?"

_Not unless Ms. Maybelle _and_ Inez both know why we broke up in the first place_, Penny thought to herself, her forehead creasing in frustration as she paced back and forth beside their usual lunch table outside. She was a wreck, and it was a rather sad sight to see.

"Penny?"

"Huh?" The redhead glanced over at Tracy with a distracted look on her face. Tracy forced a smile as she took a small bite of the apple she was eating.

"I really think you should go," She added casually, after a few seconds of hesitation. Penny knew that Tracy was right, even if she had no recollection of these plans whatsoever.

"Yeah," She began to say, as she slowly sank back down onto the bench of the lunch table. Penny sighed, wrinkled her nose in thought, and then crossed her legs. She could stop by her house, change clothes, and then head over to the Stubbs' house, maybe even a little bit earlier than expected. That could possibly eliminate any awkwardness with Seaweed, because then they could leave more quickly.

"I'll go," Penny conceded, her shoulders falling slightly. She wasn't sure if she would end up regretting her decision, or not, but she knew that, despite her and Seaweed's current standpoint, she couldn't just abandon Inez and Ms. Maybelle. They were her good friends, too, and had helped her through a lot of things, both direct and indirectly, and she wasn't about to just cast them aside along with everything else that had gone wrong.

* * *

>After school let out, Penny went straight home. After sharing a small goodbye and a few words of encouragement with the ever doting Tracy and extremely preoccupied Link before they left early for the studio earlier that day, she felt a little bit better about her trip over to Seaweed's house. <p>However, on her way home, she actually walked slowly this time. Rushing home to watch The Corny Collins Show just didn't strike her as important today. Her mind was so cluttered with thoughts, that she could barely see straight as she tried to maneuver through the late-afternoon crowds near the bus stops and crosswalks.<p>

As soon as she got home, she received little notice from her mother. Since she had found out about the break-up between Seaweed and her, Prudy had been rather cheerful and in eerily good spirits. Nevertheless, she was still as strict and Catholic as ever, because her punishments hadn't let up at all, and Penny had more than just noticed.

Penny was quick to choose her outfit, yet careful to conceal it with one of her ugly old dresses and a very unflattering sweater, when she went to meet with her mother downstairs at around a quarter after

six. She had stayed in her room since she returned home from school, idly doing her homework, or doodling on blank sheets of notebook paper, but now she was completely dressed and readyâ€”though, she had no knowledge of what she was truly in for.

"And just where are you going, Penny Lou?" Prudy wondered, from her reading place by the fireplace in the living room. Penny winced and froze. She had practiced this all day, ever since Tracy had brought the event to her attention. So, she didn't think that it would be too difficult to lie to her.

"I guess I forgot to tell you, mother," She said quietly, her eyes trailing the floor. Penny glanced worriedly at the front door, and then looked back to her mother, who was looking at her intently, despite the book still being open in front of her. "Father Benedict's son invited me to eat with his family tonight, and to help plan the church's retreat next summer. They're thinking of taking a mission trip to France, too, you knowâ€”" Prudy's face practically glowed at her daughter's words.

"Oh, finally!" She said, swiftly, yet carefully, tossing her book onto the table, as she shot up to go over and hug Penny tightly. "Well, honey, you know how I feel about you telling me things last minute; however, how can I object to something so wonderful?" She was squeezing Penny so tightly, that she actually had to keep herself from choking from lack of air.

"Okay, mother, okay," She said, after a moment, trying to sound cheery. "I'm going to be late if I don't head out now. I have to walk," As soon as the words left her mouth, Penny knew that they shouldn't have.

"I could drive you, dear," Prudy said as she released her daughter, a peculiar look on her face. She didn't quite comprehend why Penny would want to walk when she could just as easily take the bus, hail a cab, let Prudy drive her, or, better yet, have her company pick her up. Penny laughed nervously and scratched her fingernails against the exposed skin of her arm.

"Thanks, Ma, but," She put on the biggest, most convincing, fakest smile that she could possibly manage. "I would really like to walk. I need some fresh air, andâ€”" Penny tried to keep her face from making any awkward twitches as she tried to conjure up some good lie. "time to think about some really good ideas for that mission trip."

After surveying her daughter for what seemed like all of eternity, Prudy nodded her head and folded her hands in front of her.

"All right," She sighed, clearly uneasy about the idea of her walking around by her lonesome, if only because she had very little trust in Penny to go straight to her promised destination. "But, your curfew still stands, young lady. Are we clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Penny smiled slightly, her skin crawling from the sternly maternal look that her mother was giving her. "See you tonight, mother," She called over her shoulder, as she began towards the front door.

"Goodbye, Penny Lou," She stared after her, and then clawed around for her book on the nearby table. "Remember: curfew!" Prudy put in

swiftly, as an afterthought.

"Yes, mother!" Penny replied loudly in response, since she was halfway out the door at that point.

After closing the door gently behind her, she sighed heavily and practically flew off the steps of her house and down to the sidewalk. Once she had walked far enough and had rounded the first corner, she peeled off her old sweater and the ugly dress covering her real outfit to reveal a very well-fitting, v-neck, red cocktail dress. It wasn't terribly low-cut, given that she was going out with Seaweed's mother and little sister, but it was still very flattering, and she almost blushed when the chilly wind blew against her bare arms and legs. She hoped that she hadn't gotten too dressed up for the occasion, but she knew, either way, that Ms. Maybelle wouldn't mind. She was a come-as-you-are kind of woman.

If anything at all, a little part of Penny hoped that she would see Seaweed, and maybe

Penny shook her head and shivered as she draped her sweater tightly around her shoulders while continuing to walk. They were over; she just had to come to terms with that, however hard and painful it was proving to be. Girls weren't supposed to think of their boyfriends, or crushes, or whatever's, like that anyway.

Even so, she just could not look anywhere without something reminding her of him, and that really frightened her.

* * *

>When she arrived at the Stubbs' house, she had already pulled her unattractive sweater around her shoulders again, given that she was still a little self-conscious about her choice of dress. Swallowing nervously, she lifted her hand and rapped her knuckles gently against the door. She heard very little noise on the other side, which was odd. Miss Maybelle was always a very well, loud-and-proud woman, as was her daughter, so the fact that she barely heard anything at all made little sense to Penny. <p>After waiting for nearly three minutes, she heard the lock click, and she braced herself with a smile to greet either Inez or Ms. Maybelle herself.<p>

However, she was face-to-face with neither of them. Instead, before her, stood Seaweed, with an incomprehensible expression on his face. Penny had almost gasped in surprise when she saw him. He was the absolute last person that she had expected to see, even though this was technically his house, too.

"Oh, hi Seaweed," She said coyly, her eyes averting to the porch for a moment. "I didn't know you'd be here."

"I live here," He replied smoothly, as one of his eyebrows rose in question. Penny cringed slightly. She knew it was a stupid thing to say, but she couldn't help it.

"Is your mother or Inez around?" Penny went on, figuring that she could cover her clumsy tracks with something that was, at the very least, somewhat intelligent. She was fidgeting, and Seaweed knew that that was a significant sign of apprehension with her.

"They'll be down soon," Seaweed promised, his voice neutral. Penny could tell that he was holding back somehow, but for what, she wasn't sure. "You can wait inside for them, if you want," He shrugged and moved aside for her.

Penny hesitated for a moment, nodded, and then slowly walked inside.

"Thanks," She muttered softly. Her heart ached to be back in this house again. Penny frowned and began to pull warily at the sleeves of her old sweater. Suddenly, she just wanted to go back home, tell her mother that the plans had been cancelled, lock herself in her room, and just never come out againâ€"not for school, food, or anything. She would just put those stupid Lord's Prayer records on repeat and lie there, completely blank.

But, that wasn't very productive, now, was it?

Sighing quietly, she stared over her shoulder. Seaweed had disappeared to God-knows-where, and now she was left alone, in silence. Pursing her lips tightly together, she wandered over to the couch and plopped down. She promptly crossed her ankles and rested her hands on her knees.

Well, this wasâ€¦ _awkward_.

Penny glanced around the room absentmindedly, her fingernails tapping against her knees. If there was some hidden sign of what she was supposed to be doing right now, she had clearly missed it. In her inattentiveness, she didn't even bother to take notice to Seaweed reentering the room.

"Hey, Penny?"

Penny jerked her head up and looked over at him, her eyes wide until she realized who it was. She ran her tongue over her lips self-consciously, and then looked away.

"Yes?" She countered gently, her eyes raking the carpet-covered floor.

"Mind if I sit here while you wait?"

Yes.

"No," Penny forced a tiny smile and moved over on the couch. "Of course not."

Seaweed walked over and sat in a chair near the couch, making Penny feel overtly stupid for shifting on the couch to make room for him to before with. They both sat in silence for the longest time, without any sign of his mother or younger sister. Penny began to wonder if maybe she had her days or times crossed. After all, it had happened _many_ times before.

"Penny, I've been meanin' to talk to you," Seaweed began, after more than five minutes of just listening to the clock on the wall. Penny's heart sank, and she wanted to cower back to her house now more than ever. Confrontations still were not her strongest points, by a long shot, and here she was, having one all over again.

"Oh?" Was all she could manage, especially with her face as red as it was.

"I don't think we've got everything settled here, Penny," He sighed and turned to look at her, even if she was currently refusing to look at him.

"Whatâ€¦ do you mean?" She asked guardedly, her pale eyes wandering up to look at him for a few seconds before darting away again.

"Penny, look at me," He demanded, his voice still as kind and gentle as ever, despite his request. Penny swallowed again, her fingertips curling against her knees. "What's the matter with you? You've barely looked at me at all since you got here. That's not like you."

"Seaweed, Iâ€¦" She cut herself off and stared at her feet, suddenly very annoyed with this whole thing. "I just want to go out with your mom and Inez, and I'll leave you alone from now on, okay?" Penny mumbled angrily, her eyebrows lowered as she stared off at nothing in particular.

Seaweed narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Whatever happened to the sweet, gentle, smilin' girl I fell in love with, huh, Penny?" He asked, rather bluntly, as he stared at her. Penny was shocked at his words, and visibly faltered over her own words as she searched blindly for them.

"She's still here!" She insisted, however crossly. "Seaweed, I still don't understand what I did to deserve this. I did nothing wrong!" The words fell out of her mouth recklessly, and she didn't even bother to try to pick up the pieces afterwards.

"You and Fenderâ€¦"

"Fender and I? Seaweed, that doesn't exist!" Penny rejoined, as she threw her hands up in the air in frustration. "How many times do I have to tell you? He came onto me. I had nothing to do with itâ€¦nothing whatsoever."

"Yeah," He said bitterly, his gaze practically burning holes through her. "You sure did a lot to stop him, didn't you?"

Penny's mouth dropped open. This wasn't like him at all. To her knowledge, she had never seen this side of him beforeâ€¦this jealous, sarcastic, and even purposefully hurtful side of himâ€¦and she was entirely set on never seeing it again, regardless of this altercation's outcome.

"Seaweed, you're being ridiculous," She declared finally, her eyebrows furrowed in disbelief. "You should listen to yourself for once, and then maybe you'd understand how wrong you are about all of this." Penny couldn't say that she completely regretted those words tumbling out of her mouth; however, at the same time, she knew that there were better word choices in existence.

Seaweed stared at her for a long time, his eyes aflame with

determination, and, much to Penny's surprise, hurt.

"Is that it, Penny? Is that all you have to say?" He wondered, his voice hinting his disappointment. Penny frowned. What did he want her to say? She had been harping the truth since the beginning of this whole ordeal. She had just decided that there was no point in going on with this masquerade of hope any longer. If he wasn't going to believe her then, why was he going to believe her now?

"What do you want me to say?" She ventured, her eyes finally locking with his. Penny knew she sounded weak and defeated, but that was actually how she felt. She didn't want to play these games with him anymore. It was taking its toll on her in every way imaginable, and she even knew that she didn't deserve to go through that.

Seaweed sighed and rubbed his temples with a few fingers for a moment, before forcing himself to his feet.

"That you don't want to be with me anymore," He started, and continued before she could interrupt. "That you don't care about me at all, and that you don't want to see me again," Seaweed looked at her, fully prepared to just leave her be, should she decide it. "That's what I want to hear from you."

Penny's mouth remained agape; she really couldn't believe what she was hearing. This fight seemed never-ending, and she absolutely detested it. This wasn't how it was supposed to be, and somehow she felt that they both knew it. She couldn't bare to be apart from him any longer. It was killing her; it was a very literal ache, one that traveled all over her body, and she just couldn't take it.

She missed his arms, the way he held her, how gentle he was, the softness of his lips and his embrace. She really was going out of her mind. It was as though his lips were moving, and yet she couldn't hear any words coming out of them. Penny barely even remembered that she was in his living room, stranded with only a soundless argument to hold her steady. It was at that single moment that she lost herself. Her mind went blank, and she could scarcely recall why she had even come here.

For more yelling, perhaps? To settle this? Whatever it was, the purpose was completely lost at this point.

"Seaweed," Penny thought that she had said his name, but she couldn't really be too sure. She felt her eyes beginning to well up with tears, but she bit them back as she stood, ready to stop him if he even tried to leave her again. "Don't," She said softly as her hand found a place on the fabric of his sleeve, the corners of her lips still turned downward in a vanquished frown.

She was through with this, completely. Penny promised herself to just forget about the possible reactions and consequences, and to just end this in any way that she could.

So, in that instant, she edged forward, her lips pressing firmly, yet with unyielding affection, against his. He didn't pull away, but his confusion was more than evident to her. She could taste his hurt, and the pain he still held in his heart from what had happened, but at this moment, she vowed to erase any signs of it.

It took only a few seconds before he allowed the kiss to continue, his hands resting at the small of her back, like they always had. She drew herself into him while her arms snaked their way slowly about his neck, her fingertips running ever so lightly against the uppermost part of his back. Her teeth moved stealthily to, with the smallest amount of strength and effort imaginable, brush against his bottom lip, her body aching as the familiar feeling of their previous moments together flooded her mind.

He took to her sign and allowed his hands to wander down the curves of her back and spine, all qualms and ill feelings swiftly forgotten as he peeled that unbecoming sweater off her shoulders to reveal that fiery red cocktail dress. While she let her tongue trace an assured path along his lips, she eventually met up with his own, where a passionate and almost venting dance began between the pair of them. All of the anguish of the break-up, and all of the unnecessary remarks that had flown between the two of them were tossed carelessly into the intensity of the sweltering kiss.

His hands cast this agonizing spell on her, and as she ran her fingernails over his collarbone and stepped forward, causing him to stumble briefly, she knew just how deeply she felt for him. She had always known, if only in the back of her mind, but this was it, the final straw.

Penny had always wanted for him to hold her intimately, and to touch her without any reservations. She felt safe with him and wanted nothing more than to be with him, and only him. He meant more to her than he would probably ever know. Tonight, at least, she was aiming to prove it to him, like she had always yearned to.

Grabbing a hold of his shirt collar, she broke the kiss briefly, leaving them both the opportunity to breathe, as shaky and heavy as it came. Feeling the security of his warm breath against her lips, she stared up at him, her eyes hollow with desire and layer upon layer of unmasked emotion. With an affirmative decision set in her mind, she lead him backwards a step or two with her grip on the collar of his shirt, and then onto the couch beside them. It was more of a stagger on Seaweed's part, for as she did so, one of his arms knocked a stray glass that was sitting on the nearby table onto the floor. The sound of breaking glass didn't even so much as draw a stare of concern from either of them.

Smirking dimly to herself, she moved to sit in his lap as best she could, given his half-lying position. Her legs rested on either side of him, and she inwardly reveled at how surprised he appeared. In the blink of an eye, she was lying down against him, her hands drawing weightless patterns on his chest with their fingernails. The closeness between them now was almost unbearable, but in a very good sense. With his hands bound at the base of her spine, she pressed her lips near his right ear, soon feeling him shiver slightly as her hot puffs of breath blew against it.

"I'm so sorry, Seaweed," She murmured into the silence, her teeth nibbling gently on his earlobe as they breathed together, their bodies no longer countering one another's rise and fall of their chests. He moved one of his hands in order to run its fingers slowly and deliberately through her silky soft locks of beautiful red hair.

"Shh, my angel. It's all right now. I've got you," Was all that he whispered back, before hooking his fingers beneath her chin. He brought her lips back to his and struck up another kiss. While suckling tenderly upon her lip, his chest tightened suddenly as he listened to the breath hitch in her throat and then release in a throaty and almost sensual gasp. The involuntary things that she did when they were together like this were more than enough to drive him over the edge. He couldn't ever recall wanting to be with her this badly before.

Penny drew back briefly, her breaths staggering as she locked her eyes with his.

"Seaweedâ€¦ what about your mother and L'il Inez?" She inquired, obvious concern in the depths of her striking blue-green eyes.

"Baby girl, they were never comin' in the first place," Seaweed smirked knowingly, and Penny's eyes widened. Before she could protest or continue on, he stole another kiss from her, to which she gladly obliged.

This moment was so perfect, and Penny was not about to let something as trying as wondering where his mother and sister were bother her. This was all that she had ever wanted and more. He was holding her so securely and tenderly, and he was so loving and gentle with every touch of his hand. And she knew that she could safely say, without a shadow of a doubt in her mind that, for the first time in years, she felt genuinely loved and protected.

And she could never thank him enough for that.

13. Author's Note

Hey, guys! Kelsey Rose here. I know you were probably looking forward to another installment of Otherwise, but I can honestly, genuinely promise you one in the very near future! I am going to get myself back into this story, and I know just how to do it. I know that some of you may be opposed to the idea, but I am going to turn this into a movie-verse story. I just cannot connect with the musical characters as much as I can with the movie ones anymore. Well, I mean, there's not much of a difference. However, if this story is to continue and finish (like I desperately wish it to), I need to sustain my interest, and that means going to the movie standpoint. :)

Nothing's really going to change, to be perfectly honest. I am keeping Penny's hair red, because there would be no point in saying that she turned into a blond overnight. Besides, I still prefer the red, anyway. Other than that, virtually nothing is changing, ya'know? I just suppose for future character appearances, this switch is necessary. ;) I certainly hope that you guys will be pleased with what's to arrive soon with this story. I do believe it's relatively juicy.

Anyhow, I just wanted to let you guys know. You may PM me if you have any questions, comments, concerns, or, hell, if you want to see something happen in the story. 'cause you never know when I may oblige. I'm up for anything, even if I've already got the whole story, and onward, set in my mind! We always need some bumps and action along the way, right? And, this story is written for the

audience.

Sincerely,

theatrics / Kelsey Rose

14. I Could Lie

Wow, I never thought that I would ever be updating this again, but thanks to my amazing, AMAZING fiancÃ©e, I have. Hehehe! If you thank anyone for this update, thank Tracy (writergirl2003). She is my inspiration; she's what gets these fingers typing and, of course, then some. Thank you SO much for being my everything and my support and my backbone, baby. You are absolutely AMAZING! I am absolutely in awe of you.

Now, onto the fun! Welcome back to _Otherwise_. Get excited. The heat's about to turn up _intensely_.

This is for you, Tracy.

****Disclaimer****: I don't own Hairspray.

* * *

><p>Penny knew that there was going to be quite a bit of explaining involved once she went home, and yet, she had not cared. Something about facing her mother now didn't bother her. Sure, she had single-handedly ensured herself a lifetime behind barred windows and a multiple-locked door, but she just could not bring herself to care at this point. She had just spent the most amazing night with one of the few people in her life that actually made sense to her. Well, he did now, anyway.<p>

It had been a spur of the moment decision, to be honest. She had come over to fulfill a promise that had apparently never been made, and ended up spending far more time over there than originally intended. Motormouth Maybelle and L'il Inez had both arrived back home at around fifteen until nine at night, only to find a seemingly empty house. Seaweed and Penny had long since retired to his room, making a vague and uncaring point to pick up that shattered glass eventually. All that Penny had cared about was being able to fall asleep in his arms after a such an incredible exchange between the pair of them. And, even though she knew there would be hell to pay for it the day after, she was so caught up in the moment, that she told herself that there was no point in caring.

Everything had felt so perfect and exactly like all of those obscenely clichÃ© stories about someone's first time together. Only, with Penny, it felt a million times better than all of those put together. She had been in pure ecstasy, and had fallen asleep in a very similar mindset. Her mind had gone blank with emotion, and she could barely contain her excitement and admiration as she laid down to fall asleep with him for what felt like the first time. They had taken naps together before, sure, but this was different. The bond between them had been replenished, and there was a new sort of connection that threatened to make her heart burst with adoration and gratitude.

She had awoken the next morning, his arm still wrapped snugly around her waist, with his chin resting against her shoulder. It was early, she could tell that much, because the lighting was dim, and she could hear a few birds chirping noisily outside. Stirring slightly, she carefully stretched her legs, unable to hide her smile as she felt Seaweed shift behind her.

"Hey, sleepyhead," She cooed sweetly, her hand reaching for his to give it a quick, yet reassuring squeeze.

"Hey there, baby girl," Seaweed managed a drowsy smile as he let his fingertips brush over her hips. She had slept in one of his bigger, button-down collared shirts that went down to her thighs, and the fabric felt almost foreign to his touch on her, but in an extremely wonderful fashion. "How'd you sleep, angel?" He asked quietly, his chin still resting gently against her shoulder.

"The best I've slept in years, I think," She chimed happily, a smile practically glued to her soft, pale lips. Seaweed chuckled softly and pulled her closer to him, leaving no space between them this time.

"I hear ya," He concurred, his lips brushing idly against the skin of her ear. She couldn't suppress the giggle that followed as she gently inhaled. His scent was positively intoxicating. She smiled as she remained nestled up next to him.

"Mmâ€|" She hummed quietly, her eyes fluttering slightly, debating whether or not they wished to fall shut, or stare absentmindedly across the room, inwardly squealing over the thoughts of the night before.

"What?" Seaweed wondered sleepily, yet curiously, as he shifted a bit in order to get even more comfortable.

"Last night was just soâ€| so," Penny paused as she tried to conjure up the perfect description. Amazing just didn't cover it quite as well as she would have liked it to. It was _so_ much more than that, after all.

"Shh," He allowed his thumb to brush against her right temple. A knowing smile pushed its way onto his features. "I know," Seaweed assured her, knowing full well what she was trying to say.

Penny blinked her eyes slowly a couple of times, trying her absolute best to shake the heavy feeling of relaxation that was presently coating them. She felt absolutely at ease and definitely was not keen on the idea of allowing this feeling to pass. Exhaling softly, she shifted slightly and soon found herself face-to-face with him, though his eyes were still closed.

"Hey, Seaweed," She began, her eyes fluttering open as she gazed at him curiously.

"Yeah, baby?" He echoed, his own eyes forcefully willing themselves to open. Though, they were instantly put at ease at the sight of the beautiful redhead still tangled up in his arms.

"You don't think that your mama will mind that I was here, do you?" Penny wondered honestly, her eyebrows furrowing against her forehead.

She nor he had not thought about that before, if only because they were and had been far too caught up in the moment.

"Nah, darlin'â€"

"Seaweed Jamal Stubbs," Bellowed the voice of the proud and prominent Ms. Maybelle Stubbs.

Penny cringed. Talk about irony, she mused slightly to herself, as she pushed herself up in Seaweed's bed. He followed suit and tossed his covers from him. Penny's pale eyes watched him in silence as he plainly walked toward his door.

"What, Mama?" He called, irritation clinging evenly to voice.

"That's ma'am to you, son," She countered with a sense of sharp affection. "Are you and your girl ever gonna come out here and get somethin' to eat, or did you expect a bed 'n' breakfast? 'cause I got news for you two, I ain't comin' in there andâ€|" Her voice trailed as she apparently moved across the house to do something, or another.

Penny found herself giggling softly as she allowed her legs to drape off the side of the bed. She always felt so at-home here. The Stubbs' were incredibly welcoming and warmhearted people, and Penny absolutely loved when she was asked over to their home.

Seaweed grinned widely as he glanced over his shoulder and back at his girlfriend. He scratched lightly at his head, and then walked over to stand before her.

"Well, you heard her," He chuckled and extended his arms to her. "C'mere, baby."

Penny smiled and leisurely stood. She was instantly welcomed into his arms as he took her into a tight affectionate embrace.

"Seaweed," She laughed gently while he began to sway her very lightly. "Iâ€| uhm," Penny paused to glance up at him, her eyes brimming with soft and unyielding affection. "Thank you."

"What could'ya possibly be thankin' me for, angel?" He asked her playfully, as he placed a light kiss upon her head of gorgeous, red curls.

"Everything," Penny replied, feeling a little silly, but then just as quickly brushing it aside. "I just wanted to tell you that, andâ€|" Her eyebrows twitched slightly before furrowing. Her tongue had suddenly become tied, and she had not the faintest idea why.

"Hm?" He blinked at her encouragingly, tenderly releasing his hold on her.

"Seaweed, I loâ€"

"Seaweed!" Inez's stanch voice cut through the air as the young girl burst into her older brother's room. "Mama says that if you don't get yourselves into the kitchen right now, she's gonna cut you both off from breakfast. She's tired of waitin'!"

Penny's heart sank low in her chest as she allowed her eyes to gaze elsewhere. Dropping her arms dismally to her sides, she clamped her teeth firmly on the inside of her lower lip, and then watched as Seaweed rolled his eyes in sheer annoyance at his loud, younger sibling.

"There's a door for knockin' there for a reason," He countered with that fond, yet irritable air of sibling rivalry.

"It ain't closed. So, I didn't bother knockin'," She crossed her arms over her chest and threw a look of defiance in his direction.

Seaweed smirked somewhat as he warmly snaked his arm around Penny's waist.

"Still, we coulda beenâ€"

"Ew!" Inez shrieked, her eyes wide with disgust. "I'm tellin' Mama! I knew somethin' was goin' on!" She declared boldly, as she swiftly stalked off toward the kitchen.

Penny blinked her eyes at a slow pace, her eyes rising up to meet Seaweed's.

"Are you sure that wasâ€"

"A good idea?" He smiled knowingly.

"Well, yeahâ€|" Penny echoed uncertainly. The absolute last thing that she wanted was for Ms. Maybelle to think any less of her. Although, it was not as though she was going to go around apologizing for something that she felt as though she was thoroughly ready for.

"It'll be fine, babe. Mama ain't gonna care," Seaweed dismissed the issue with scarcely any thought.

"Butâ€"

He hushed her affectionately by placing a sweet kiss on her lips.

"Baby," He smiled and brushed a couple of strands of her hair from her face. "She trusts us."

Penny sighed and nodded her head.

"You're right. I'm sorry," She offered him quietly, before glancing back up at him. "I justâ€| really don't want to give her any reason to hate me, or anything."

"Penny, that's crazy talk," Seaweed quirked an eyebrow at her. "How could you ever do that?"

"I dunno," Penny's shoulders fell into a shrug.

Sensing his girlfriend's ambiguity, he reached out and tilted her chin up slightly with his fingers. He drew her closer to him, and

then pressed his lips softly and invitingly against hers. Penny melted instantly, her knees virtually buckling at the mere sensation of his lips pressing so warmly against her own.

"Seaweed," She breathed, soon after the kiss had briefly come to a stop. His lips were mere centimeters from her.

"Don't worry, my angel," He told her, his voice both soothing and calm. "Everything's all right. Let's just go and get somethin' to eat, a'ight?"

She nodded, an unconscious smile beginning to form on her lips.

"Okay," She replied contentedly, before glancing down abruptly as she realized a sudden chill. "Wait, Seaweed."

He turned, as he had already started toward his door.

"Yeah, darlin'?"

"Iâ€"uhâ€"can I get some more clothes first?" She wondered shyly, a small, light pink blush creeping over her cheeks.

Seaweed laughed good-naturedly, and then made his way over to his dresser.

"Why didn't you say somethin', Penny?"

"Well, I didn't notice until just now!" Penny trilled, realization hitting her at full force. Inez had seen her in nothing but a long, buttoned-down shirt. She felt mortified. "I can't believe I didn't notice," She muttered, a heavy sigh soon following.

"Baby, you really need to just chill out," He told her fondly and with a smile, as he tossed her a pair of his red pajama pants. "People are gonna think somethin's goin' on with you."

"Maybe something is," She insisted purposefully, with a faux twist of melodrama. Grinning, she caught the pair of pants, and then slipped them on.

"Now, c'mon, before my Mama has a conniption fit," He took her hand and led her to the kitchen.

* * *

><p>The breakfast had been wonderful. They had all laughed and joked about current and previous events, as well as whatever else happened to come up (such as something about some sort of rabies-infested cat making its home next door, or something).<p>

This was about the same time that Penny painfully realized that she was going to have to head home and face the music sooner or later. Breakfast had winded down, and they were all finished; they merely remained for the sake of enjoying one another's company. Penny absolutely detested the idea of having to leave, particularly now.

"Penny, dear," Maybelle began, as she delicately wiped the corners of

her mouth with a napkin. "How long're you plannin' on stayin' with us, honey?" She asked, merely genuinely curious.

Penny's shoulders drooped significantly.

"I hate to impose, Ms. Maybelleâ€|" She ventured quietly.

"Darlin', hush now! You ain't imposin'! I just asked you a question, sweet child," She gave a hearty chuckle.

"Well," Penny paused, thumbing her thoughts for some sort of intelligible reply. "I should really go home now, butâ€|" She stopped herself again; she just could not shake the feeling of absolute dread and terror at the thought of remaining home. Prudy had most likely already called the police, and there was just no telling the effects of that.

The Stubbs family looked on at her expectantly, while Seaweed sneezed her hand, encouraging her to continue.

"I'll just get myâ€| things together, Ms. Maybelle, if that's all right," Penny told her unfortunately, as she looked up at them.

Maybelle Stubbs hesitated momentarily, sensing that something was not quite right, but then looked toward her son.

"Well, you heard the girl. Seaweed, go get her things together," She began, politely silencing Penny's attempt a protest before she continued. "Penny, I'm gonna call Tracy. I want her to meet you and walk you home."

"Mama, I'm gonna walk her," Seaweed told her firmly.

"Son, now you know that you can't take that girl all the way up to her door, as idiotic as that is," Maybelle replied somewhat bitterly. She had heard the horrid stories that Seaweed had relayed to her about Penny's mother, and she was not going to risk either of them getting hurt.

"I'll be fine," He told her decisively. "I ain't gonna be seen. We've done this many times before."

Maybelle was diffident still.

"A'ight, son, but be careful. I don't wanna have to get a call from the cops sayin' some crazyass woman has my only son at knifepoint," She advised him somewhat humorously, yet still with a hint of an honest warning.

"Mama," He urged her, catching Penny's obvious waves of discomfort.

"You two are excused," She told them warmly, as she stood, beginning to gather plates.

As they began to walk in the direction of Seaweed's room, she called out to them one last time:

"Be careful."

"Yes, Mama," Seaweed droned, before leading Penny into his room. Her heart was pounding uncompromisingly in her chest, but she was not about to further worry him with that knowledge.

"Penny," He watched her with raw concern. "Are you sure you're gonna be all right? You know my mama was jokin'."

"I know," She sighed and swallowed. "I'm justâ€¦ I don't know, Seaweed. I'm scared."

He immediately took her into his arms.

"I gotcha, baby," He told her tenderly. She curled her arms around his shoulders. "You're gonna be all right, okay? Tracy'll be right there, and I'll be just around the corner. You sound the call, and I'll be there."

Penny chuckled ever so slightly. She knew he would be. Seaweed was always there for her, regardless of the situation or the consequences. He would never allow her to suffer alone, not so long as he had any say in it.

"I'm ready," She told him, after a brief, much welcomed, moment of silence. "I'll go and change."

He nodded quietly to her and reluctantly released her.

"Thank you, Seaweed," She said softly, her fingertips just barely brushing against the skin of his arms as she moved back.

"You never have to thank me, sweetness," He leaned down to place a kiss on her forehead.

She smiled and nodded her gratitude one last time before grudgingly turning. Her dress was already in the bathroom. Now all she had to do was retrieve it.

"Hey, Penny?"

"Yeah?" She turned her head and stopped just short of his bedroom door.

"You were sayin' somethin' earlier," Seaweed watched her, his eyes edged with intense concern for her. "What was it?"

Penny's heart picked up an even greater speed. She had almost completely forgotten another one of her fruitless attempts at expressing her deeply rooted affections for him.

"Iâ€¦ don't worry about it," She forced a veiled, yet aggrieved smile upon her pretty features. "It's nothing." She immediately regretted the words, but did nothing to clean up the damage, as she moved out of the room and toward the bathroom to change back into her own clothes.

"A'ight," He blinked somewhat dejectedly. Seaweed had a feeling that there was something that she was keeping bottled up; and yet, at the same time, he felt as though he knew precisely what it was.

* * *

><p>Seaweed and Penny had since left the house, much to both of their disappointment. Tracy had accepted the request, and had said that she would meet them just shy of Seaweed's house, about half a block away. As they silently walked, arm-to-arm, Tracy's form soon came into view. She waved a greeting, but was somewhat put off by the long faces of both of her friends.<p>

"Hey, you two," She said guardedly, the tiniest of smiles on her face. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," They replied in unison, which startled Penny a little.

"Where's Link?" Penny asked lamely, inwardly glad that Tracy had not brought him with her. She did not necessarily wish anymore company with her than absolutely compulsory.

"He couldn't come," Tracy could not suppress the frown and sadness from her voice. "He's been really distant lately."

"Yeah," Penny offered dryly, shocking both Seaweed and Tracy, though they said nothing about it. Typically, Penny would have jumped at the chance to comfort her best friend, but she simply could not bring herself to that today.

"The whole Council has been really strange, Penny," Tracy continued, figuring that her friend just hadn't caught on to the urgency in her voice yet. "They keep grouping off; they've been whispering nonstop, you know, _way_ more than usualâ€|"

Seaweed muttered something agreeing with Tracy's observation. Then, after a brief pause, Penny rejoined in response.

"Can we please go to my house now?" Her voice was running on desperation, and Tracy finally got the picture that now was not the time to voice her own concerns. Seaweed wanted to cringe at this drastic personality change of hers. Though he was doing his best not to take it personally, he could not help but think that it was partially his fault, some way or another.

"Of course, Penny," Tracy sighed somewhat. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Penny began walking again, with both of them just as easily following. There was a thick air of discomfort in the atmosphere, but Seaweed and Tracy both seemed to catch Penny's unvoiced hint and kept silent.

Seaweed soon curled his hand around hers and could all but feel the tension that was radiating from her. Something wasn't right, and yet he knew not how to properly voice his concern now, in the wake of her brusque, but certainly unintentional replies.

He chose to remain quiet, for now, if only because he wanted to ensure that she was at least somewhat in her right mind once she arrived at her house.

Thus, as they drew closer and closer to the Pingleton residence, the group began to instinctively slow their pace; that is, until they

issued an abrupt and cautionary stop before turning the corner onto Penny's street.

"It's okay, darlin'," Seaweed spoke to her reassuringly, as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. Penny could feel a tingling sensation of dread flowing from the tips of her toes to the top of her head as she stared at the street corner.

"Seaweedâ€|" Her voice broke slightly, and she had to force herself to swallow away a rather large lump in her throat.

"Shh, I gotcha, baby girl," He wrapped his arms around her as Tracy watched on with apprehensive eyes.

"Penny, you knowâ€| she called my house last night," Tracy began hesitantly. "She's called the cops seven times already," Her friend added carefully.

"I should have guessed," Penny murmured, her shoulders falling.

"But, we're here," Tracy reminded her. "We're not going anywhere until we know you're okay."

"Tracy's right, Penny. I ain't goin' nowhere 'til I know my baby's all right," Seaweed rocked her gently. She was eternally grateful for him right now.

"I know," She spoke as calmly as she could manage. "Thank you."

"G'on, darlin'," Seaweed urged her. "You know you'll feel better once you get this over with."

Penny's mouth grew dry. He was right, but she couldn't shake her fear.

"Yeah," She breathed, and then moved away from him slightly. Leaning up on her toes, she placed a quick kiss on his lips. Penny's tongue was heavy with the brilliant thought of uttering those three, overtly simple words, but she simply could not bring herself to do it.

"I'm going," Penny told them, before nodding her head to Tracy, who assumed her position beside her best friend. Glancing back at Seaweed one last time, she moved down her street, her heart performing back-flips in her chest in the most horrible of ways.

A rush of anxiety hit her suddenly, and Penny immediately stopped.

"Tracy," She started. "Go back with Seaweed."

"What?" Tracy looked at her incredulously.

"Please, just do it," Penny advised her with veiled panic.

"Okayâ€|" She trailed off, her eyes wide with alarm at the sudden request. "If you're sure, Pennyâ€|"

"Please, _go_."

Tracy nodded quickly, and then swiftly walked back down the sidewalk to where Seaweed was hiding out on the corner.

Penny swallowed again and glanced back toward her house. Something wasn't right; she could feel it even more prominently now. Summoning up the last of her nerve, she started toward her house, her heart heavy with worry.

She was nearly up the walk entirely before she paused. She could hear conversation and even occasional laughter inside. Her mouth dropped open slightly; she could hardly believe what she was hearing. Furrowing her eyebrows, she timidly turned the doorknob and walked inside, only to be greeted with immediate silence by those inhabiting the living room.

"Penelope Louise Pingleton!" Prudy wailed as she thrust herself up from her place on the couch. Penny scarcely had any time to realize just who the other guests were, aside from the police officer reclined in the nearest chair, as Prudy snatched a hold of her. She could tell that she was inwardly seething.

"Heavens above, Penny!" She shouted at her, as she forcefully took Penny into her gawky arms into such a tight, unnatural embrace that the redhead knew that she was seriously in for it later.

"If it weren't for your friends here, Penny Lou, I would have had the entire Baltimore Police Department after you!" Prudy released Penny from the embrace, but kept a strained hold on her daughter's arms. "Those pesky officers don't listen to me anymore, you know, but Officer Clarksdale over here," She paused to cast him a courteous smile, which he promptly waved to. "He knew that this was serious and came right away!"

Penny paused and backtracked. Her friends? She craned her neck, and she nearly gave in to her fatigued knees.

On her couch, sat Fender, Lou Ann, and Mikey—"all members of The Corny Collins Council. She could not believe her eyes. What in the world were these, essentially, complete strangers doing in her home? More appropriately, what in God's name was Fender doing in her home?

"Hello, Penny," Lou Ann cooed with composure, her expression unreadable as she snapped both Fender and Mikey back into reality.

"Hey," Mikey offered her, while Fender flashed her a tamed grin of sorts.

"Nice to see you again, Penny," He spoke as though they were old friends, and Penny could not help but feel a certain sense of rage brewing in the pit of her stomach.

"Penny, we explained to your mother how you had gotten stranded in such a distasteful part of town," Lou Ann spoke, in such a manner that Penny knew that it was rehearsed—and better yet, not even composed by the speaker. She had never heard Lou Ann act, much less speak, with such poise during school, on the show, or even at rehearsals. "—and how you had to stay over at my house after my

mother and I found you late last night, lost. She didn't know that we were friends, apparently, and that was why she didn't have the number to call," Lou Ann paused, probably to keep herself from laughing at the absurdity of her own words, Penny presumed. "I told her how you left early to meet with your advisor from the Stamp and Coin Club this morning, and here you are!"

As she drew her endless bundle of lies into a close, Lou Ann allowed herself a heavy exhale from all of the effort. Prudy eyed her daughter, and then nodded to Lou Ann approvingly.

"Yes. They were so kind to relay this to me," She began, as the three displayed their greatest, showtime smiles. "as my own daughter is clearly too incompetent to do so herself," She grasped Penny by the ear. "She will be grandly, permanently punished, you had best believe it!"

Penny winced at the sudden, sharp pain, and then warily rolled her eyes.

"She was so obviously lost in the wrong part of town," Fender continued, building off what Lou Ann started. "Lou Ann told me that some Negro was hassling her into coming into his home for shelter. I knew it was dangerous, just from the sound of it."

Penny could not believe it. Her fell mouth instantly agape.

"Mom, how can you believe them!" She spat, yanking herself free. "They're from the show that you absolutely hate!"

"Now, now, Penny Lou, in this household, we Pingletons do not hate," Prudy reminded her matter-of-factly. Her daughter stepped away from her doting, motherly hand and scowled. This was such a show. Prudy always acted like this around company; the front was virtually unbearable. She was so different behind closed doors.

"They are not my friends!" Penny retorted angrily, her eyes blazing as she particularly noted Fender with her eyes.

The three, save Mikey, pretended to be appalled at the notion.

"Penny, hush," Prudy grasped her daughter's arms warningly. "This is not how we act, especially in the midst of guests. Cut the attitude, young lady! You are already treading on thin ice."

"I don't even know them," She hissed beneath her breath, yet still loud enough for her mother to hear. "I wasn't with Lou Ann last night." Her name felt foreign to her tongue; although, she could not take the time to care.

Prudy's eyes flashed and narrowed.

"I beg your pardon, young lady?" She began to say, her fingers baring down painfully against the skin of Penny's arms. "I do not believe that such an honest girl as Lou Ann would lie. Her mother and I attend mass together from time to time. She is a wonderful girl."

Penny was fuming, at this point. Her mother did not. Whatever these

three had told her, they were completely wrong for doing so.

"I was at Seaweed's, Mom. I stayed the night, and I was there this morning," She spoke recklessly, her eyes aflame challengingly.

"You were not," She said frankly, her fingernails digging into Penny's arm now.

"Yes, I was!"

"No, Penny Lou, you were not," Prudy assured her, a dark shadow coming over her expression. Penny's chest tightened. "Shut your mouth this instant, young lady. You are already deep trouble for lying to your mother and embarrassing your entire family in front of our guests."

"What family?" Penny challenged her. "And what guests? These people aren't welcome here."

Prudy whipped Penny around and stared her threateningly in the eyes.

"Penelope Louise Pingleton, get upstairs to your bedroom right now," She demanded her. "I don't want to hear a word from you. I will take care of you later."

"Fine," She growled, breaking away from her.

Lou Ann smiled with faux kindness as Penny ascended the stairs.

"Goodbye, Penny!" She chimed. "We hope to see you again soon."

"'Bye," Mikey managed with a roll of his eyes.

"I'll see you at school," Fender guaranteed her, with that troublesome grin of his. "'Bye."

"Goodbye, Miss Pingleton," Officer Clarksdale, who had been quiet and virtually unconscious with sleep this entire time, spoke with a small wave.

Penny trudged up the stairs, her shoulders squared with anger. She could not believe it; she just could not believe it. Who were they to invade her personal life? What in the world did they have to do with anything? Fender, she could almost understand; he was just asking for trouble. He knew that he could make her blood boil, and that there was essentially nothing she could do about it.

She did not understand. She did not know these people. They were Tracy, Seaweed, and Link's coworkers. She had, in no way, attempted to associate with them. In fact, when her friends would go places with some of them and Penny would attend, as well, she felt awkward and out of place.

Now, out of nowhere, they were trying to push their ways into her life, uninvited. She groaned in frustration as she slammed her bedroom door shut.

She had never been so angry and frustrated and thoroughly confused in her entire life. None of this made sense; none of this added up.

Penny plopped down, face-first, onto her bed. She did not want to think about it. She did not care to. Rolling over onto her back, she stared up at her ceiling aimlessly. She could hear the unfamiliar sound of her mother's laughter from downstairs, so loud and boisterous, that she wondered how any of those 'guests' could stand it.

She sighed heavily, and then rolled over to look at her nightstand. Much to her surprise, an unopened letter poked out of a book that she had never finished reading. Curiously, she sat up and reached for it, her fingers grasping a hold of it with uncertainty.

There was no return address that she could see, and it was addressed to her in the most plain of fashions. Blinking slowly, she carefully opened the letter, and then retrieved the piece of paper. After unfolding it, she began to read it.

"_If you are reading this, then congratulations. You have been gratefully spared from some catastrophic fate by the hands of your mother, I'm sure. However, I would advise not getting too comfortable. You still have a lot coming in your direction. I would be careful trusting those friends of yours, if I were you. Things are about to get nasty._

Try not to take this too personally. It is strictly business. Though, in the meanwhile, enjoy the calm while you can. We're not finished.

Watch yourself. We don't play kids' games. You have just landed yourself in a realistically, ill-fated, adult crises. Either figure it out, or learn to live with it.

Good luck getting anyone to believe you now, when all of them have already begun to turn their backs on you.

Have fun trying."

Penny stared at the letter in disbelief. Her mouth was as dry as cotton, and her hands shook with anger and distress. Everything was beginning to piece together in her mind. All of those times that she had felt eyes on her, that Fender had sought her out, that people had looked at her and treated her more differently than usual: she was beginning to understand. She felt as though she now finally understood almost everything, though to what extent, she was vastly uncertain.

Tracy, Seaweed, and Link were the budding starlets, thoughâ€”not her.

It didn't sit well with her: why would anyone, particularly the Council members (if she could even rightfully give them credit), have any business trying to sabotage _her_?

End
file.